

Memoirs of Wehrmacht Soldiers

—— From Survival to Victimhood



Image 1: "We beat, we beat, and we will beat", (taken by the author at German Historical Museum, January 19, 2020)

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Introduction:

“When I was a kid, a group of boys were caught stealing from a local shop. My father was furious when he found out. I protested to him: ‘but I did not steal anything’. ‘Maybe’, he said, ‘but you were there’”— Peter Müller, 1945¹

This story originated from the monologue of a fictional German tank captain in the recently released WWII video game, “Battlefield 5— The Last Tiger”, which depicted the last days of 3 crew members in a German tank at the war’s end. Though fictional, the protagonist of this game trailer, Captain Peter Müller, had a historical reference that can be traced to thousands of German Wehrmacht soldiers who enlisted in the Nazi’s war-machine. Among the almost 20 million German soldiers who fought under Nazi leadership in years between 1939 and 1945 ², many of them might not personally committed the regime’s most brutal crimes such as the Holocaust, but just like Peter Müller, their presence in the war itself represented an inglorious experience.

It is difficult to tell the exact proportion of perpetrators and bystanders in the wartime German military for in most cases these two groups of people were tightly intertwined.

This task became more complicated since the normalcy of the war itself was brutal and violent. As Ben Shepherd put it: “It is not clear just how many *Ostheer* (Eastern army) units were involved in what degree of atrocity, or which combination of attitudes and circumstances

¹ On the Media, “Last Tiger” December 5, 2018: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JmlpHDeHjDE>

² Michael Geyer’s forward to Hamburg Institute for Social Research, *The German Army and Genocide: Crimes against War Prisoners, Jews, and Other Civilians, 1939-1944* (New York: New Press, 1999), 7

combined to drive that involvement. Nor it is always clear which portion of killing on the ground actually fell into the category of “atrocities” and which constituted a harsh but more measured response to an irregular form of warfare which was itself often deeply underhand and ruthless.”³ But researching the war through the lens of German soldiers can still yield insightful implications for historians to interpret nationalism, and militarism, and war atrocities. So long as our international community still contained the space for the rise of radical nationalism and right-wing politics, it would never be an obsolete endeavor for historians to examine the German soldiers and their experience in WWII.

However, historical researches on German WWII soldiers were influenced by two factors. The first one being Cold-War politics. Between the 1950s and the 1980s, the West German Federal republic and its NATO allies intentionally chose to ignore the atrocities of the Wehrmacht in Eastern Front and criminalized subsequent Soviet-backed regimes such as East Germany. In order to rearm against the threat of communism, politicians in West created a false but convenient comparison between the unsullied Wehrmacht versus the evil SS.⁴ The mainstream narrative generated during the Cold War asserted that German soldiers were led by an evil regime and that war crimes were not their fault. Despite partaking in the violence committed in occupied territories, regular German soldiers were portrayed as victims of the Nazi dictatorial leadership and Russian Communist brutalities rather than perpetrators of the war atrocities. Even Dwight D. Eisenhower, the Supreme Allied commander during the war, had once

³ Ben Shepherd, “The Clean Wehrmacht, the War of Extermination, and beyond”, *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 52. 2 (Cambridge University Press: Jun, 2009) (<https://www.jstor.org>), 456

⁴ Wolfram Wette, *The Wehrmacht: History, Myth, Reality*, trans. Deborah Lucas Schneider, (London: Harvard University Press, 2006) location on Kindle 3059-3060

openly praised the German soldiers in 1951 that “the German soldiers had fought bravely and honorably for their homeland”⁵

This thesis explains that the realpolitik-oriented Cold-War historiography not only failed to uncover the truth, but even gave rise to waves of veteran culture which spared no effort to justify German war in East Europe. Many former Wehrmacht soldiers believed that fighting the war was glorious since they combated for a righteous cause, namely, defending the German fatherland and European civilization against Bolshevism.⁶ By comparison, although the East German state regarded anti-fascism as the ideological cornerstone of its legitimacy, the SED leadership sanctioned free discussions on sensitive topics such as Nazi soldiers and their war experience. Even anti-fascist literatures such as Anna Segher’s wartime novel, *Das siebte Kreuz* (The Seventh Cross), were strictly examined by the censorship office *Hauptverwaltung Verlage und Buchhandel* (Central Office of Publishing and Book-selling).⁷

The second factor influencing our understandings of the defeated German soldiers is the existence of hegemonic narratives written by triumphant powers. As the cliché says that “history is written by the victors”, what ordinary German soldiers really thought about the war and their roles, in some ways, were neglected or selected only to confirm the hegemonic voices. Therefore, in the literature of WWII, Anglo-American intelligentsias created popular novels and films about the heroic defenders of democracy who fought from the muddy Dunkirk beach to the

⁵ David Clay Large, *Germans to the Front: West German Rearmament in the Adenauer Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 114

⁶ Otto Carius, *Tigers In The Mud: The Combat Career of German Panzer Commander*, trans. Robert J. Edwards (Mechanicsburg PA, Stackpole Books: 2003) xi

⁷ Elizabeth Wenger, “Speak, Memory? War Narratives and Censorship in the GDR”, *The Slavonic and East European Review* 96.4 (October 2018) (<https://www.jstor.org/>), 644

bloody D-Day, and ultimately the V-E-Day; their Russian counterparts also bear into heart that it was mother Russia who resisted firm and determined from the 1941 Moscow, 1943 Stalingrad, and all the way to the 1945 Berlin. These narratives might be accurate and important. But what is missing for the public is the German narrative. The stereotypical narratives usually switched between the two extremes that they tend to portray German soldiers as either hatred Nazis or innocent soldiers led by an evil regime.⁸ It was only during the past decade when two controversial German films, “Downfall” in 2004 (*Der Untergang*)⁹ and “Generation War” in 2014 (*Unsere Mütter, unsere Väter*)¹⁰, demystified the German soldiers and brought detailed and more diverse narratives of them under public spotlight.

The goal of this thesis is to retrieve the voices of the defeated German soldiers and contributing to build their narrative. Their voices are essentially worth examining since German soldiers had perhaps the most intimate and first-hand experience with the war, and ultimately the defeat. To do so, historians should dig deep into not only official archives but also the soldiers’ diaries and memoirs. This thesis rejects “the victors” story through the analysis of the viewpoints of the “defeats”—— German soldiers.

This thesis relies primarily on German soldiers’ diaries, letters, and post-war memoirs in order to present an detailed narrative from those soldiers. The selected soldiers all came from West Germany and Austria. Through scrutiny of their voices as case studies, this thesis argues that in their writings in different time periods during and after the war, German soldiers struggled

⁸ Ben Shepherd, “The Clean Wehrmacht, the War of Extermination, and beyond”, 459

⁹ Oliver Hirschbiegel, *Downfall*, 2004

¹⁰ Philipp Kadelbach, *Generation War*, 2014

not just to physically survive the war, but also to morally justify their roles in the war. Participating in arguably the world's most destructive war in history, German soldiers of World War Two encountered an irreconcilable dilemma since they were on one hand both psychologically and physically unprepared for the magnitude of violence laying ahead. On the other hand, despite such unpreparedness, most German soldiers chose not to waive the bloody business imposed by the regime even if knowing that sometimes rejection would not cause any serious punishment. To reconcile their personal abhorrence with war and their active participation during the war, German soldiers, during the heydays of slaughtering, found their reliefs mainly by getting drunk, and seeking temporary refuges by exchanging letters with family members. While such methods enabled German soldiers to better cope with embattled frontline life, it also paved the ground for them to better fulfill the orders given by the Nazi authority, which included burning down villages and murdering enemy civilians.

However, in soldiers' post-war memoirs, they tended to emphasize the wounded and embattled sides of themselves and avoided discussing their own participations in war atrocities. Practices like denial, selective remembrance, and self-victimization enabled German veterans to not just integrate into the post-war democratic society, but also reinvented the historiography of the war and Europe. Appealing Cold-War political discourses, German soldiers' historical narratives actually occupied the mainstream historiography in West Germany for decades. This thesis will explain that the prejudiced narratives were the products of "cognitive dissonance" that happened when soldiers experienced drastic psychological changes at a certain moment.

Given the large number of research subjects and the time-span, it becomes almost impossible for me to conduct an overarching and encyclopedic research. Instead, I tried to

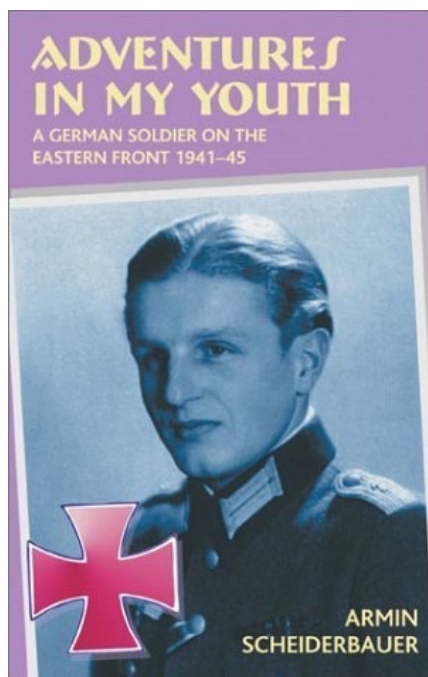


Image 2: portrait of Scheiderbauer in army uniform, (*Adventure in My Youth*, cover)

present several molecules out of this giant edifice, and write a thesis basing on individual stories. This thesis selects the war diaries, letters, and post-war memoirs of five Wehrmacht soldiers coming different social backgrounds. In the following paragraphs, I will introduce my five soldiers with brief biographical information about each of them.

The first is Armin Scheiderbauer. An infantryman coming from Vienna, Scheiderbauer grew up in a conservative Christian family. Influenced by his family, Scheiderbauer was normally reluctant to discuss high-politics and tended to focus on the trivial business of his own company and his letters with family. His father, a German WWI veteran, also joined the Wehrmacht and served in France. Scheiderbauer entered the war in 1941, and spent the all of his combat life on the Eastern front. He served in the 252nd Infantry Division of Army Group Central, and was finally captured by the Red Army in a military hospital in Danzig. He was then sent to an Anti-fascist labor camp near Danzig, and went back to Vienna in 1947. Many years

later, Scheiderbauer published his combat memoir *Adventures in My Youth* which was originally written only for his daughter.¹¹

The second character is Gottlob Herbert Bidermann. He grew up in a middle class family in Cologne. Just like Scheiderbauer, he also joined the war in 1941 and spent all of his combat career on the Eastern front. Bidermann's regiment belonged to Army Group North and he was in charge of an anti-air company. Bidermann's writing style expressed his remorse and psychological pains during war. Despite his doubts on the Nazi leadership, he insisted on the innocence of German veterans. Bidermann was captured by the Soviet troops in Courland, Latvia and then transported to a Gulag camp near Crimea. Having suffered serious illness and hunger, Bidermann was released in 1948. His memoir, *In Deadly Combat*, was initially written in 1964 only for surviving veterans of his division.¹²

The third character, Konrad Jarausch, is a commander of German Prisoners of War camp in Poland and Belarus. Father of historian Konrad H. Jarausch, Konrad Jarausch was initially a high-school teacher of religion and history. By the time of war, senior Jarausch was already at his forties and was exempted from combat duties. His son, Konrad H. Jarausch, collected the letters senior Jarausch wrote to his wife and published them. Given his age and poor health condition, Jarausch senior was put in charge of prisoner camps and therefore developed close contacts with Russian prisoners. Witnessing hundreds of prisoners died from starvation and hypothermia, Jarausch tried to offer them sparse amenities. Overtime, Jarausch himself was

¹¹ Armin Scheiderbauer, *Adventures in my youth: a German soldier on the Eastern Front, 1941-45*, trans. C.F. Colton (Solihull, West Midlands, England: Helion, 2003)

¹² Gottlob Herbert Bidermann, *In deadly Combat: A German Soldier's Memoir of the Eastern Front*, Derek S. Zumbro, ed, trans, (Lawrence, Kansas: the University Press of Kansas; 2000)

conquered by the omnipresent atmosphere of depression, and confessed to his wife about the atrocities caused by Germans. Jarausch died of typhoid in 1942. Despite his personal doubts on the war and compassions to the enemy, Jarausch reluctantly complied with the Wehrmacht's starvation policy.¹³



Image 3: military portrait of Konrad Jarausch, (*Reluctant Accomplice*, front cover)

The fourth is Otto Carius. Unlike Jarausch, Carius tried to reject the notion that ordinary German soldiers had participated in war atrocities. In his memoir *Tiger in the Mud*, Carius reflected his own wartime actions in a defensive stand by epitomizing himself as a good Wehrmacht soldier who, with his fellow Tank crews, only fought for the survival of Germany and Europe against the onslaught of Bolsheviks. Because himself enlisted in an elite tank

¹³ Konrad Jarausch, *Reluctant Accomplice : A Wehrmacht Soldier's Letters from the Eastern Front*, ed, Konrad H. Jarausch, and Konrad H. H. Jarausch, (Princeton University Press, 2011)

division(technical troops) throughout the war, Carius was even personally greeted by Himmler for his extraordinary service. Carius' memoir resembled the old-fashioned or even reactionary cold-war explanations of the war at Eastern front.¹⁴



Image 4: military portrait of Otto Carius, (*Tigers in the Mud*, 129)

Finally, the fifth is Willy Peter Reese. Similar to the letters of Jarausch, Reese's memoir also disproved the claim that Wehrmacht soldiers were guiltless in the war. Reese's memoir contained his psychological reflections of the mass murder, homesick, and self-pity. Unlike Carius, Reese frankly recorded the Wehrmacht's violence against enemy civilians during anti-partisan campaigns. His writings reflected both the "victim" and "perpetrator" sides of German soldiers, and dugged deep into the minds of frontline soldiers. Reese's language established a

¹⁴ Otto Carius, *Tigers In The Mud: The Combat Career of German Panzer Commander*, trans. Robert J. Edwards(Mechanicsburg PA, Stackpole Books: 2003)

nuanced balance between literary beauty and factual report. But Reese's did not witness the publication of his memoir because he was killed during actions in June 1944 near Vitebsk, Russia. His wartime manuscript, *A Stranger to Myself*, was edited and published only in 2003.¹⁵

This thesis is also heavily influenced by the secondary literatures of historians such as Christopher R. Browning, Nicholas Stargardt, Thomas Kühne, and Omer Bartov. Browning's book *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the final solution in Poland* deeply informed my research.¹⁶ I firstly came to know this book during sophomore year, and it showed me how to interpret a gigantic historical event from the narratives of micro and grass-root participants. Without *Ordinary Men*, this research wouldn't have been born or completed. *The German War* by Nicholas Stargardt inspired my writing structure.¹⁷ I learned from this book how to write a story based on individual testimonies. Thomas Kühne's book *The rise and fall of comradeship: Hitler's soldiers, male bonding and mass violence in the twentieth century* answered to many of my research questions.¹⁸ His explanations on the mythified concept of "comradeship" and German soldiers' relationship with war atrocities offered crucial insights for this paper. Finally comes Omer Bartov. Bartov was one of the first historians who began to challenge widely accepted image of "Clean Wehrmacht". In his book *Hitler's Army*, Bartov

¹⁵ Willy Peter Reese, *A stranger to myself: the inhumanity of war : Russia, 1941-1944*, trans. Michael Hofmann, ed. Stefan Schmitz, (New York : Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005)

¹⁶ Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the final solution in Poland* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992)

¹⁷ Nicholas Stargardt, *The German War: a nation under arms, 1939-1945: citizens and soldiers* (New York, NY : Basic Books, a member of the Perseus Books Group, 2015)

¹⁸ Thomas Kühne, *The rise and fall of comradeship: Hitler's soldiers, male bonding and mass violence in the twentieth century* (Cambridge, United Kingdom; New York, USA : Cambridge University Press, 2017)

argued that instead of remaining uninvolved with Nazi regime's genocidal crimes, the Wehrmacht constituted an integral part of state and society in Nazi Germany. Bartov additionally argued that soldiers of Wehrmacht were neither forced to murder nor misguided by a few opportunist officers. Rather, he argued that ordinary Wehrmacht soldiers had already internalized Nazi ideologies of race and terror .¹⁹

In addition to published book, several academic journal articles written by Elizabeth Wenger, Edward B. Westermann, Ben Shepherd, Hannes Heer, and Morris Janowitz offered more background information to this thesis in different sub-fields. Elizabeth Wenger's article "War Narratives and Censorship in the GDR" explained the East German state's narratives and censorship on war literatures.²⁰ Edward Westermann specifically examined the relationship between drunkenness and German soldiers' participation in the Final Solution.²¹ Ben Shepherd reviewed existing scholar studies on the Wehrmacht's crimes in anti-partisan war.²² Hannes Heer researched the consequences of Hamburg Institute for Social Research's renowned *Wehrmachtsausstellung* (Wehrmacht Exhibition) which exhibited photos and artifacts indicating Wehrmacht's accomplice with the Holocaust.²³ Last but not least, Edward Shils and Morris Janowitz's 1948 research on the male-bounding function of primary groups in the German army was one of the first post-war social researches on German frontline soldiers.²⁴

¹⁹ Omer Bartov, *Hitler's Army: Soldiers, Nazis, and War in the Third Reich* (Oxford University Press: 1991)

²⁰ Elizabeth Wenger, "War Narratives and Censorship in the GDR"

²¹ Edward B. Westermann, "Stone-Cold Killers or Drunk with Murder? Alcohol and Atrocity during the Holocaust", *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 30, no. 1 (Spring 2016)

²² Ben Shepherd, "The Clean Wehrmacht, the War of Extermination, and beyond", *The Historical Journal* 52.2 (Cambridge University Press: 2009) (<https://www.jstor.org/>),

²³ Hannes Heer and Jane Caplan, "The Difficulty of Ending a War: Reactions to the Exhibition 'War of Extermination: Crimes of the Wehrmacht 1941 to 1944'", *History Workshop Journal* No. 46 (Oxford University Press, 1998) , (<https://www.jstor.org/stable/4289586>)

²⁴ Shils and Janowitz, "Cohesion and Disintegration in the Wehrmacht in World War II" *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 12.2 (Oxford University Press: Summer, 1948) (https://www.jstor.org)

Looking closely at the five selected soldiers in this thesis, I came to realized that most of them tended to portray themselves too nice and weak to be considered as war criminals or morally degenerated soldiers fighting for the world's most reactionary dictatorship. Additionally, these veterans tended to interpret the war as a catastrophe in which the morally noble German soldiers combated against two evil regimes. One was the yoke of Stalin's Bolshevism, and the other one at home was Hitler's Nazism. To explain German frontline soldiers' remembrance of the war, and to understand their roles in the war, this thesis will divide into three chapters with each of them dealing with topics like alcoholic intoxication, writings to home, and self-victimization. This thesis also tries to connect academic works with popular medias by adding brief commentaries on films about German soldiers of the war.

In the end, as I mentioned on the earlier page, this thesis does not try to contribute to a quantitative study of German WWII soldiers and their reflections from the war. Nevertheless, despite my sparse knowledge in psychology and sociology, chapter three will adopt cognitive analysis to explain the selective remembrance and self-victimization practices of German veterans.

Chapter One: Drunkenness and War Intoxication

Introduction:

When watching the somber and thought-provoking film *Downfall* (2004), I was appalled and soon disgusted by the massive swing-dancing, boozing-up, and suiciding scenes that took place in the underground bunker of Reich Chancellery. In the film, uniformed soldiers danced and drunken with female secretaries of the Nazi high-command while the shrills of enemy artillery bombardment overwhelmed and silenced their phonograph. The shell explosion trampled the ceilings and shutdown their desperate-indulgence. Then the once exhilarated crowds fled in chaos and fear, and in the midst of ashes, they stumbled back to the bunker where the remaining Nazi regime existed for its last 14 days. Upon the eventual downfall, desperate yet fanatic soldiers and senior officials intoxicated themselves with strong liquors and cigarettes while they simultaneously pitying for the war and each other. Finishing up a couple shots of strong liquor and some unfinished cigarettes, the drunken Nazi loyalists swallowed cyanide capsules, and shot themselves on the heads. Having heard the first gunfire in the room, many of the rest soldiers followed suit. After a few seconds, only the over-turned glasses and liquor bottles stood still on the table, beneath which laid the bleeding corpses.²⁵

While the film narrated the final days of wartime drunkenness and alcoholic intoxication, such practice was commonplace in German military throughout the six years of war. But alcoholic consumption in the WWII German Army as a specific subject of research was rarely studied by scholars, and therefore important questions remained. What is the relationship

²⁵ Oliver Hirschbiegel, *Downfall*, 2004

between alcohol-drinking and death? How comes that drinking became the last thing that one would finish before him committing suicide? How liquors facilitated the Nazi military?

To answer the above questions, this chapter will examine alcoholic intoxication among WWII German soldiers and its effects on soldier's actions and consciousness. Specifically, relying on soldier's memoirs and testimonies, this chapter will develop into three sections. Section one primarily reveals the soldiers' unpreparedness for the war, and the rise of alcohol as their psychological intoxication. Section two researches the role of liquor among regular frontline soldiers to resist fear and loneliness. Section Three explores the drinking practice among Holocaust perpetrators and its effects on the murderers' behavior. In conclusion, this chapter will argue that no matter how pathetic and innocent these soldiers claimed concerning why they drank, their narratives proved that heavy drinking was not just a grass-root activity, but also a state policy directed by the Nazi leadership. Drunkenness as an entertainment in German army exceeded the normal practice of getting drunk. It was deeply intertwined with male-bounding, combat morale, and political indoctrination.

Section One: Welcome to the Community of War

In the autumn of 1943, death surrounded German infantrymen in Upper Silesia. Red Army had gradually gained an upper hand in this unprecedented military struggle, and the annihilation of 6th Army at Stalingrad traumatized the entire Wehrmacht. The 19 year old infantry platoon commander Armin Scheiderbauer digged his trench and waited for his uncertain fate while physical-exhaustion and fear loomed over his body. Hundreds of kilometers away

from his home in Vienna, Armin Scheiderbauer was among one of the 20 million Wehrmacht soldiers ²⁶ who enlisted for the perhaps the world's most racist and fanatic dictatorship.

Though frustrated with the gloomy battle situation and somehow unpleasant cultural differences between him, an Austrian, and his Reich German comrades, Scheiderbauer was temporarily thrilled to know that a shipment of new armament is on the way to his battalion, and most importantly, with it transports brought the battalion brand new supplies of liquor. Scheiderbauer wrote, "On Sundays the food was better and there was even a small ration of schnapps. It was simple hooch, often sweetened with artificial honey." ²⁷ After a couple of shots, he turned on a field wireless receiver, and listened the music from *Volkskonzert* (People's concert). With Schnapps and music, Scheiderbauer wrote: "I felt myself to be on a higher cultural level."²⁸ Living away from their families and fearing their immanent death, drinking alcohol was the common solution for the soldiers at the front to cope with their troubled life.

If German culture saw beer as "liquid bread", the Nazi regime certainly adopted "Heavier liquid bread"(drinks with high alcohol contents) to facilitate its killing machine. Not need to mention that early National Socialist gatherings mainly took place in beer houses and Hitler's failed Beer Hall uprising, just by the start of the war, the Nazi regime regularly dispatched special liquor rations to frontline units and elite SS battalions. According to Edward B. Westermann: "Increasingly, German officials used alcohol as an incentive and a reward for superior achievement. Ultimately, however, the Wehrmacht, the SS, and the police were the

²⁶ Michael Geyer, *The German Army and Genocide*, 7

²⁷ Armin Scheiderbauer, *Adventures in my youth*, 48

²⁸ *ibid*, 49

primary beneficiaries of the Reich's limited stock, as evidenced by Goebbels's order for the diversion of 150,000 bottles of schnapps to soldiers at the front."²⁹

Back to the memoir of Scheiderbauer, how it comes that the war had changed him and made him to be so enticed with schnapps while simultaneously living an "un-livingable" life? The story originated from two years ago when Scheiderbauer was still held great expectations for the war.

On 1 August 1941, the 17 year old Armin Scheiderbauer parted with his Viennese Christian parents and boarded on the train to Jäger Barrack in Westmark, a border region that had been recently annexed to the Reich after France declared armistice. Though not officially a Wehrmacht soldier by then, Scheiderbauer already began associate himself with the great struggle of the German race.³⁰ While still being in the camp, Scheiderbauer received a little book of patriotic war poems during the preceding Christmas: *As Duty Commanded*. He cited the last verse of a well-known poem *An die Mutter*:

*If I fall, Mother, you must bear it
and your pride will overcome your pain
for you were allowed to bring a sacrifice
to him whom we mean when we speak the word Germany.*³¹

When Scheiderbauer celebrated his first Christmas in camp, he could not have known that the heydays of German conquest faded away as the Army Group Centre encountered the first

²⁹ Edward B. Westermann, *Stone-Cold Killers or Drunk with Murder*, 4

³⁰ Scheiderbauer, 1

³¹ *ibid*, 12

major defeat in Moscow. For many of them, the setback at Moscow was merely a temporary loss due to cold weathers and long supply line.³² The next summer, Armin completed his barrack trainings. He was a *Fahnenjunkerunteroffizier* (Officer Cadet NCO) of 7th Infantry Regiment, Army Group Centre. Few weeks later, Scheiderbauer joined the Germany's massive invasion force into Soviet Union, and he soon began to lose the initial enthusiasms. The romanticized war-poems praising individual sacrifice for the fatherland and Scheiderbauer's own romanticization of a crusade conquest against the barbaric Bolshevism would soon be challenged by the harsh reality.³³

On 10 July 1942, Scheiderbauer reached his frontline position in Upolosy, some 150km south-west of Moscow, as a machine-gunner. While being impressed by the vastness of Russian landscape and natural scenery, Scheiderbauer learned to give up his previous romanticization of a soldier's life. It was not just actual combat alone frightened frontline soldiers, but also did the process of waiting. During battle intervals, instead of stretching their bodies and ease the consciousness, soldiers like Scheiderbauer had to stay crouched and worrying the dispersed enemy shells that could anonymously take his life away. Tranquility and peace never accompanied sunset. After the night fell, Scheiderbauer was dominated by a perpetual, blind cacophony of explosions.³⁴ Even though Scheiderbauer had not even taken a single glance at his enemy's face, he were already overwhelmed by the atmosphere of death and destruction. Scheiderbauer recalled his first mid-night sentry experience: "I had sense of loneliness. I did not

³² Omer Bartov, *Hitler's Army*, 15

³³ Scheiderbauer, 16

³⁴ *ibid*, 16

know my way about the positions. I did not know where the enemy was. I was overcome by a feeling of being deserted. I had fell ill. I felt completely alone.”³⁵ And all these horrors took place when enemy’s actual attack had not yet begun.

When the decisive attack finally arrived, bombardments from Red Army’s long-ranged artillery and endless streams of machine-gun fire crumbled Scheiderbauer’s psychological determination, and then, a squad of Stalin’s formidable 56-tonnage KV-2 heavy tanks with their deadly 15cm howitzer blew up and rammed his battalion’s defense. From the Russian charging waves Scheiderbauer heard the furious howls of “*Urraih*”, the “whistling and bursting” of the shells, and his wounded comrades moaning and creeping.³⁶ Scheiderbauer recalled:

I noticed as I passed, the dead platoon commander of the 7th Company. It must be a tiny splinter in the dead, or in the heart that brought his life to an end. I could no longer see any of my own men. Even the company commander was no longer to be seen.³⁷

Being caught in the middle of slaughtering filed, Scheiderbauer did not chose to die for the fatherland or the destiny to conquer *Lebensraum* (Nazi’s plan for conquering living space for the Aryan race) Instead, he ended up saving his life by jumping into a river.

Scheiderbauer’s intimate relationship with death was certainly not an individual case. According to the statistics of The National WWII Museum New Orleans, casualties of German military force(including the Wehrmacht, Waffen SS, Oder Police, Volkssturm, Luftwaffe, and Navy) reached a total number of 5,533,000 personnel, which was equivalent to 63-84% of nation’s total military and civilian casualty(6,600,000-8,800,000). While the Soviet Union and

³⁵ *ibid*, 18

³⁶ *ibid*, 20

³⁷ Scheiderbauer, 27

China all experienced a great heavier total civilian and military causality than German, the percentage of military loss to the total casualty in Germany still ranked the highest among all major combatant nations. In Japan, by contrast, the military causality was 2,120,000 personnel, and contained about 68-81% of total military and civilian casualty. Comparing Germany with Japan, it can be argued that although both nations had similar military casualties by their percentages to total national losses(63-84% in Germany, and 68-81% in Japan), Germany experienced far greater military losses in terms of quantity.(5,533,000 in Germany, and 2,120,000 in Japan) ³⁸ The magnitude of brutality of armed conflict with Germany was so intense that Nicholas Stargardt, author of *The German War*, argued: “even the Japanese did not fight to the gates of the Imperial Palace in Tokyo as the Germans fought for the Reich Chancellery in Berlin”.³⁹

But even within the German army, *Ostheer* (East Army) were the most deadly troops and suffered the greatest casualties. Max Hastings, editor of Willy Peter Reese’s memoir, mentioned that “Britain made much of victory at El Alamein in November 1942, in which just 3 German divisions were committed while over 180 Axis formations were fighting in Russia. Even on the D-Day, Germany only deployed 59 divisions in the west, while 156 remained in east.”⁴⁰

³⁸ *Research Starters: Worldwide Deaths in World War II*, <https://www.nationalww2museum.org/students-teachers/student-resources/research-starters/research-starters-worldwide-deaths-world-war>

³⁹ Nicholas Stargardt, *The German War: a nation under arms, 1939-1945: citizens and soldiers* (New York, NY : Basic Books, a member of the Perseus Books Group, 2015), 1

⁴⁰ Max Hastings’ foreword, *A Stranger to Myself*, xxi

Drinking a cup of schnapps on his train to home due to combat wound, Reese confessed that “no one leaves Russia unscathed.”⁴¹

Spending years in the fatal and embattled community of war, German soldiers, like their Soviet and Western Ally counterparts, developed mechanisms to resist the psychological impacts of death. Due to the scarcity of entertainment in frontline trenches, soldiers could only depended on the frugal resources within their disposal. Among these frontline entertainments, alcohol was among the most welcomed one.⁴² Given the vasodilation and intoxication effects of liquor, in the case of German army such as Schnapps, soldiers could not just restore physical strength since drink made them feeling warm, but also could they intoxicate the consciousness and thereby staying immune to the brutality around them.

The German military authority’s specific choice of rationed liquor, Schnapps, revealed its top-down policy of alcoholic intoxication. Different from the American regularly rationed 3•2 *Beer* (3.2% alcohol content), the German Schnapps typically had a 15-20% alcohol content, and other brands such as *Jägermeister* had an alcohol content of 35%, Vodka had a content of 40%, and Brandy 35–60%.⁴³ By comparison, although the U.S War Department also equipped G.Is with alcoholic drinks in order to “deal with the problems associated with off-duty boredom, loneliness, and to promote male-bounding”, it never offered frontline soldiers with hard liquors like Schnapps or Vodka.⁴⁴ Moreover, just providing soldiers with 3•2 *Beer* encountered intense

⁴¹ *ibid*, 131

⁴² Edward B. Westermann, “Stone-Cold Killers or Drunk with Murder”, 5

⁴³ Types of Alcohol, <https://www.alcoholrehabguide.org/alcohol/types/>

⁴⁴ Jenel Virden, “Warm Beer and Cold Canons: US Army Chaplains and Alcohol Consumption in World War II”, *Journal of American Studies*, 48. 1 (February 2014), (<http://www.jstor.org/>), 96

opposition since domestic temperance groups and some churches continued to lobby for restrictions and voiced objections to alcohol sales as they related to servicemen, with complaints coming from many directions often arriving in the Office of the Chief of Chaplains.⁴⁵ Given that beer was traditionally considered as “liquid bread” in German culinary culture, there are sound reasons to suspect that favoring schnapps over beer somehow reflected the Wehrmacht and SS High Command’s intention to intoxicate their soldiers with higher alcohol content.

Additionally, different from soldiers of Soviet Union who would cheer up with Vodka to celebrate victories, German soldiers, especially when they came closer toward the defeat, booze-up with a desperate mentality and a couldn’t care-less attitude. The term *Wurstigkeit*, in the context of German soldiers, specifically refers to a couldn’t-care-less attitude that regard mass-murdering as a normal state of being and stay aloof and distant from humanity.⁴⁶ In the last years of the war, German soldiers renounced their previous romanticization and euphoria which occurred in the Operation Barbarossa and earlier campaigns.

As *Wurstigkeit* took the place over enthusiasm, taking a life away was no longer a necessary contribution to conquer more *Lebensraum* (Nazi racial concept of “living space”) or protect the Aryan master race. Rather, war-faith turned into blind faith into the Nazi leadership and the escalated atrocities. According to Thomas Kühne, author of *The Rise and Fall of Comradeship*: “Seesawing between horrible fatalities during the retreats and blind belief in Hitler, the solders couldn’t and yet had to stress doubts about a cause and a war that was

⁴⁵ Virden, 82

⁴⁶ Thomas Kühne, *The rise and fall of comradeship*, 183

altogether lost and cruelly tainted. In the dilemma, the soldiers escaped into fatalism, euphemized as devotion to duty.”⁴⁷

Section Two: Drink to resist Loneliness

On October 31 1941 on Crimean Peninsula, Gottlob Bidermann, an Anti-tank gunner of the 132d Infantry Division had just encountered a quick battle with Soviet Marines defending a garrison. After knocking out a few strongholds himself, Bidermann relieved for a while before going back to save a wounded comrade who was lying a few steps behind him.

But it was already too late. “Within seconds the soldier’s screams for help had become unintelligible mumbles as he lay in the dirt. His feverish eyes appeared wide with astonishment against his chalk-white face, and he stared forward into blackness as the shadow of death quickly stalled upon him.” Bidermann recalled: “One could not escape feeling an intense pity for our brother in the gray tunic who had been struck; yet with these thoughts each man turned to concentrate upon himself, about how he could be the next to fall, the next to meet his destiny in Russia... We were being consumed by this foreign land, being consumed with a remorseless, ever-increasing rage. The fevered minds could concentrate only on revenging fallen comrades, to kill and to destroy.”⁴⁸ Bidermann admitted in his memoir that “the general consensus reached was that simple men of robust nature often dealt with the situation more effectively, with less

⁴⁷ *ibid*, 184

⁴⁸ Gottlob Herbert Bidermann, *In deadly Combat*, 52

personal stress, than do men who are considered to be intelligent or sensitive.”⁴⁹ Bidermann’s testimony revealed one basic nature of the German invasion. That the longer soldiers remained at frontline, the further away they were distanced from culture and civilization. Soldiers bearing critical minds and punctilious moral-responsibilities could only get themselves wounded, and only the relentless and stone-cold ones could remain alive. Turing men into beasts, replacing intelligence with ignorance, the war exerted rage and deprivation that forced soldiers to intoxicate themselves through moral castration. In other words, German frontline soldiers like Bidermann were indoctrinated into moral-eunuchs who find his salvation through destruction while not bearing much psychological or moral burdens.

As death and outrage became daily routine, Bidermann learnt not just to survive the war, but also to live with it and even to find pleasure out of it. Few weeks later, when his regiment was bombarded by the enemy’s “heavy but erratic fire” which torched the black soil up against the white snow, instead of crouch down and pray, Bidermann “stretched his aching body on the floor, relishing the luxury of the heated room...we enjoyed potatoes fired with onion, rolled cigars, and for the best part, drinking corn schnapps.”⁵⁰ Soldier’s frontline recreation was tightly connected with death. In many cases, after a close contact with death, soldiers would drink liquor as reward, or simply celebrate the good fortune. For example, Bidermann recorded a case that his comrade Konrad, a driver of the platoon, traversed straight into a Russian minefield but passed unharmed because the frozen earth did not trigger the mine. Having reached Bidermann’s

⁴⁹ *ibid*, 53

⁵⁰ *ibid*, 76

foxhole, Konrad revived a warm schnapps in reward for his fortune.⁵¹ In such cases, liquor intoxicates soldier's consciousness of fear. Whether drinking when being bombed or when escaped death by miracle, soldiers depended on alcohol to immune and suppress their psychological pressure; therefore, leant to live a "un-livingable" life.

Drinking at frontline trenches was not considered to be a private business. Given their distance from home and civilian society, frontline soldiers stationed on foreign land could only rely on each other for immediate support. In some sense, frontline soldier lived in a separate and enforced society from the rest of world. The physical intimacy and psychological commonality(exposed to death) gave rise to perhaps a crucial, if not necessary, frontline comradeship that could maximize each individual soldier's chance of survival. In fact, it was not only frontline soldiers themselves held high expectations to comradeship, but also did the Nazi regime. According to Omer Bartov, Nazism viewed the comradeship in arms, the so-called *Kampfgenossenschaft* (combat community), as the paradigm for social organizations.⁵²

Bounded by frontline comradeship, a soldier ought no only care for his own benefit but also for his comrades. Such altruism sometimes even included sacrificing one's own life for the sake of other comrades. As Thomas Kühne argued "whether experienced euphorically as the heyday of homoeroticism or somberly in mood of forlornness, tender, family like comradeship was endowed with an aura of humanity. As comrades, they elevated themselves about the

⁵¹ *ibid*, 106

⁵² Omer Bartov, *Hitler's Army*, 107

maelstrom of barbarism engendered in zones of mass death.”⁵³ Living with frontline comrades, soldiers are supposed to share their alcohol, food, and cigarets with others, and those who refused to share actually imposed a self-segregation, which could only further deteriorate their chances of survival.

Back to the story of Bidermann, on June 28-29 1944, the 132d Infantry Division served a part of the Army Group North and held a thin defense line near the Baltic sea. When it came to June 1944, the Wehrmacht would soon experience its catastrophic defeat from Soviet’s Operation Bagration, which destroyed the paramount of Army Group Central and Army Group North. This time Bidermann was not spared. With only 60 men remaining in his company, Bidermann remembered the “mess tins, entrenching tools, and assorted equipment rang softly on the steel heats, and the Ivans sent departing shots after us.”⁵⁴ In desperation and exhaustion, Bidermann and his comrades shared one bottle of Schnapps.

The obligatory schnapps bottle made its rounds. Home-brewed drink left us with an unaccustomed tingling in the throat. As we passed the bottle, we felt an instinctive bond that only the survivors could know. Together we had known wind and heat, life and death. We had experienced hails of bombs and shells, tended our wounded, buried our dead, and move forward to the next encounter, knowing that eventually, we would meet the end of our journey. Most of us owed our lives to the skill and self-sacrifice of others, whom we no longer with us.⁵⁵

Started by sharing a bottle of schnapps and ended up with mourning the fallen comrades, it would be difficult to assume whether it was alcohol that triggered the emotional and pathetic senses of Bidermann, or it was comradeship that made drinking sentimental. But either-way Bidermann entwined alcohol with comradeship, embellished the sheer and dry battle foxholes

⁵³ Kühne, 168

⁵⁴ Bidermann, 215

⁵⁵ Bidermann, 216

with home-brewed liquors, and, of course, intoxicated his own fear since he would eventually follow the fallen comrades and met his destiny. The destiny however, was not the conquest of *Lebensraum* but rather death. In the next mourning, drinking resumed.

“Good afternoon, Herr Oberstleutnant!” (Bidermann called, holding his salute)

“Lieutenant Bidermann, you are drunk”

“Yes, Herr Oberstleutnant, I am drunk.”⁵⁶

In the previous Summer of 1943, Reese experienced similar drunkenness. But his expression was more literary than Bidermann’s. After getting drunken, Reese lay on the ground and wrote:

I felt strangely close to the earth. Like its trees and flowers. I felt my life blooming in this intoxicating summer; like grass and corn, it would soon sink back into harvest and decay, just like my corpse would one day sustain the seed. A feeling of security came over me. Life was large; there was no danger.⁵⁷

Section Three: Drunken Murderers

Regular Wehrmacht infantryman like Scheiderbauer, Bidermann, and Reese intoxicated themselves to relief their psychological pressure and to escape from the questions of life and death. In such sense, their stories with alcohol might sounds a bit tragic and pathetic, and such narratives at some degree victimized the Nazi frontline soldiers. Therefore, evaluating memoirs

⁵⁶ Bidermann, 217

⁵⁷ Reese, *A Stranger to Myself*, 113

of frontline soldiers, alcohol primarily served a healing function that paralyzed soldier's sensibility of danger, thereby internalizing new-conscripts into the Nazi killing machine. Through heavily booze-up, frontline soldiers found a bit comfort out of the daily slaughtering.

But this is not the entire picture of wartime drunkenness in the Germany military. As a matter of fact, such self-victimized narratives of Scheiderbauer and Bidermann avoided to connect alcohol consumption with battles especially the very actions of shooting the enemies face to face. This lack of information might be partially explained by the army regulations that forbid heavy drinking during battles. In addition to hard rules of the army, experienced veterans had naturally figured out that in order to survive, one had to stay alert and having a consciousness of the enemy. Therefore, getting drunk during combat definitely offers no advantage for veterans. However, given that WWII for Germany was not just a military war, but also a racial war against inferior races especially the Jew, we can still find the connection between getting drunk and committing crimes from the testimonies of Holocaust perpetrators.

As a matter of fact, according to Edward B. Westermann, in stark contrast to regulate or discourage drinking, the SS High Command specially dispatched alcohol rations to its Police Battalions, Einsatzgruppen squads (special execution units), and SS camp guards that were assigned to carry out the Final Solution.⁵⁸ These special rations were either given as rewards to the murders after they shot all the victims or given before they shoot to boost the fragile morale.⁵⁹ In such regard, drunkenness among the fire squads and gas chamber operators had a state-organized background in addition to the grass-root participations.

⁵⁸ Edward B. Westermann, 10

⁵⁹ *ibid*, 12

Bruno Probst, a perpetrator of Reserve Police Battalion 101, an unit which holds the responsibility for murdering 160,000 Jews and Poles in the Occupied Poland, recalled that the drunken guards “intending to kill a pole on the New Year’s Eve, shot an Volksdeutsche (ethnic German without the citizenship of the Third Reich) by mistake and covered it up by switching the victims’s identity card.”⁶⁰ When the Police Battalion 101 was deployed to the Polish town of Józefów to carry out the “final displacement of Jews”(massacre them all), alcohol became an organized supply for the shooters. Because most of the members of Reserve Police Battalion were lower-middle working class dock-loaders, craftsman, factor workers in Hamburg who had no previous experiences with shooting a rifle, let alone murdering unarmed civilians face to face, a large number of executioners felt repugnant toward their mission and roughly about 20% even chose to step back and refuse to comply.⁶¹ Even the chief commander of Battalion 101, Major Wilhelm Trapp, upon receiving his order, wept and said: “Oh, God, why did I have to be given these orders. Man,.. such jobs don’t suit me. But orders are orders.”⁶²

Given such difficulties, drunkenness became the solution to boost the morale and relief their psychological pressure. Some of the executioners were already heavily drunk before they shoot. In that regard, they were even ordered to fix the bayonet as a mark so that they would not miss the shot. Generous quantity of alcohol were provided for the executioners. Sergeant Toni Bentheim, another executioner of Battalion 101, described the scene that Jews were hanged by ropes and driven to march to their grave in the forest. The roped lane of Jews walked in chaos,

⁶⁰ Christopher Browning, 41

⁶¹ *ibid*, 77

⁶² *ibid*, 58

some couldn't carry on walking and kneeled on the ground, some dead bodies(the guard would shoot at the Jews who walked behind or refused to move) were hang on the rope and dragged by the people before them. After witnessing this atrocity, Bentheim recalled: "I myself then returned to the schoolyard. Agitated and vexed, I immediately went into the school and drank a schnapps."⁶³ If liquor could relief the psychological burden for some murders, for others, it further encouraged the rise of *Wuestigkeit* (couldn't care-less attitude). First Lieutenant Gnade, commander of the Second Company, fell into the category. A Nazi by conviction and a drunkard since the early Polish campaign, Gnade prepared alcohol before the execution thereby radicalizing his sadism and brutality. According to Christopher Browning: "one non-drinking policeman noted: most of the other comrades drank so much solely because of the many shootings of Jews, for such life quite intolerable sober."⁶⁴ In fact, not just German troops adopted drinking as a facilitator for murder, but also did Nazi collaborators in the occupied territories. One case offered by a member of Police Battalion 322 indicated that the Ukrainian auxiliaries executed Jews as they were drunk. "The drunken auxiliaries grabbed infants and toddlers by legs and tossed them into the air before shooting them down like clay pigeons."⁶⁵

While boozing-up intoxicated Policemen's consciousness and paved ground for murdering , these perpetrators never wasted the intoxication effects of alcohol. Sexual violence, specifically rape and voyeurism, was rampant among the members of reserve police battalion.

⁶³ Christopher Browning, 81

⁶⁴ Christopher Browning, 82

⁶⁵ Nechama Tec, *In the Lion's Den: The Life of Oswald Rufeisen* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1990) 103

According to Browning, Lieutenant Peter, a NCO of Battalion 101, got drunk on vodka in evening and make night patrols in the ghetto. “Booted and spurred, he entered Jewish dwellings, tore the bed covers off women, look, and then left. By morning he was sober again.”⁶⁶ In other cases, murder and voyeurism were intertwined into one crime since some alcohol-fueled executioners would first ask young Jewish ladies to undress before they were executed. For example, in the Ukrainian city of Odessa, one policeman of SD forced Jewish girls to took off their pants and then beat them with whips. Then they forced Jewish girls to took off all clothing before and shot them⁶⁷

Given all these alcohol-related crimes, there are plenty testimonies for researchers to argue that booze-up facilitated and radicalized the murdering of millions of Jews, Poles, and Soviet civilians in German occupied territories. Judging the testimonies of perpetrators, it can be induced that murderers initially drink to conquer their psychological burdens to execute unarmed civilians. However, once they became accustomed to the mass-execution, perpetrators started to aestheticize their crimes through intentional booze-up, by drinking more. That fueled by liquors, in most cases Schnapps, these drunkard butchers became increasingly sadistic, and instead of being forced to kill, they found pleasure by torturing the victims. Degenerating from ordinary men into coarse beasts, drunkard murderers massacred their own conscientiousness and morality.

⁶⁶ Christopher Browning, 153

⁶⁷ Klaus-Mischale Mallmann, “Mensch ist feiere heute’ den tausendsten Genickschuss: Die Sicherheitspolizei und die Shoah in Westgalizien”, in Paul, *Die Täter der Shoah*, 119 (Man are celebrating the thousand head-shots: The security police and the Holocaust in West Galicia)

Back to the Reserve Police Battalion 101, First Sergeant Ostmann said to one of his soldiers who refused to shoot:

“Drink up now, Pfeiffer. The Jewesses must be shot.”

“You’ve gotten yourself out of it so far, but now you must go.”⁶⁸

Conclusion:

“We have to carry out this unhappy task, shooting all the way to the Urals. As you can imagine, it’s not pretty and once can bear it only with alcohol.”⁶⁹ explained a Werner Schönemann, a SS officer who participated in executing the partisans and Jews in Minsk. “For my five-man crew, a bottle of schnapps is more smoothing than any demo charge! Sometimes we really believed that only alcohol would help us get through this damned operation(break-through Leningrad defense).”⁷⁰ wrote Otto Carius on his mission to attack Leningrad. Judging the testimonies of both frontline combatants and Holocaust murderers, a consensus can be reached that alcohol indeed facilitated the German war-machine by paralyzing soldier’s consciousness of fear, morality, and loneliness. However, as Westermann attested, the question remains as to whether the primary role of alcohol was to provide an incentive to murder or to desensitize the murderers to their actions.⁷¹

⁶⁸ Christopher Browning, 108

⁶⁹ Waitman Beorn, *Marching into Darkness: The Wehrmacht and the Holocaust in Belarus* (Cambridge, MA: Havard University Press, 2014), 72

⁷⁰ Otto Carius, *Tigers In The Mud: The Combat Career of German Panzer Commander*, trans. Robert J. Edwards(Mechanicsburg PA, Stackpole Books: 2003), 28

⁷¹ Westermann, 7

To answer this question, it is worthwhile to pay a close look at the specific scenarios related with alcohol. If Scheiderbauer's cup of schnapps brought him to a higher culture, it should fit the category of desensitize his consciousness of fear. Similarly, when the drunken Bidermann mourned his fallen comrades, he certainly took alcohol to ease and comfort his traumatized mentality. Even when Major Wilhelm Trapp of Reserve Battalion 101 for the first time was ordered to execute Jews, he drank and wept to desensitize his consciousness of morality and sense of guilt.

However, once soldiers took alcohol as the shield for their improvised crimes, such as forcing Jewish women to undress, and torn Jewish infants in the air before shooting them, their crimes could hardly be explained by alcoholic desensitization. Instead of trying to escape guilt and waive their involvement in crimes, soldiers of like such purely aestheticized themselves through torturing and drinking. In such regard, alcohol was just one means of aestheticization, and could possibly be replaced by others such as drugs, cigarettes or maybe just a cup of coffee. For soldiers of the latter category, they were just murderers, rather than drunk with murder.

Chapter Two:

Writing Home, Seeking Refuge

Introduction:

The idiom “nothing to write home about” was widespread among WWI soldiers who stationed thousands miles away from home. They used the idiom to describe their battle life as something ordinary, prosaic, and unremarkable.⁷²

But battle life was not always mundane and unremarkable. As the previous chapter discussed, frontline soldiers constantly suffered from death threats, loneliness, and psychical exhaustions. Embattled as they were under enemy firepowers, soldiers had to shoot, or wrestle the enemy soldiers with bayonets in a face-to-face manner. Exposed to such calamities, in addition to intoxicating their consciousness and sensibilities through alcohol, soldiers desperately struggled to attach themselves with the reminiscent of peace and civilization. Given the frugal frontline accommodations and the relative primitive communion technologies, soldier of WWII could barely establish convenient communications to their families and loved ones as we do today. Although phones and telegraph were ubiquitous among WWII German frontline regiments, such devices were far beyond the reach of ordinary soldiers for their private use. Therefore, writing letters, the archaic but never obsolete method, became the most popular and available choice of German soldiers to reach out with their home-front families.

The gravity of writing home for frontline soldiers can be found in various WWII films and literatures. For example, in the American film *Letters from Iwo Jima* (2006), when lieutenant

⁷² “nothing to write home about”, <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/nothing-to-write-home-about>

Kuribayashi of Japanese Army realized his squad was surrounded by the U.S Marines and himself seriously wounded, he handed his letters to his trusted friend Saigo and then ordered Fujita to behead him; Saigo, upon receiving Kuribayashi's bag of letters, buried it before himself committing a suicidal charge.⁷³ Similar stories can also be found in the epic WWII film *Saving Private Ryan* (1998). During his last moments, the asthenic Captain Miller whispered to Ryan "Kids, earn this", and then burned out his last strength to hand a letter to Ryan's mother.⁷⁴ Put it in more recent context, in film *Dear John* (2010), Sergeant John relied on letter exchanges with his girlfriend Savannah to emotionally support his service in the U.S War at Afghanistan, and suffered from depressions when the letter exchange halted.⁷⁵

Fighting a war is about destruction, but sending letters back home is about refuge. Although drunkenness could temporarily relief soldier's depression and fear, it offered no panacea since soldiers simply could not hold a bottle of schnapps all the time. But if soldiers are legal murderers by profession, sending letters back home become their method of self-preservation. Not willing to be overwhelmed by the ruthless killing operations or the fear of getting killed, soldiers picked up pens or pencil, and started writing during battle intervals or nightfalls. Whether WWII soldiers who combated in the war of destruction or contemporary U.S soldiers who participated in the "American securitization" of Middle-East and Inner Asia, writing letters back home always took important values for their wartime life.

⁷³ Clint Eastwood, *Letters from Iwo Jima* (2006)

⁷⁴ Steven Spielberg, *Saving Private Ryan* (1998)

⁷⁵ Lasse Hallström, *Dear John* (2010)

For German veterans of WWII, writing unexceptionally offered them a temporary “refuge”. While themselves stationed in cold Russian winters or the lived under strict military regulations, letters sent to home revealed soldiers’ doubts about victory, and the weak, somehow soft, side of selves. Though frontline comradeship also offered soldiers emotional support and, in some cases, even homoeroticism, writing home could bring soldiers a brief “desertion” from the destructive battles, and provide them with a prospect, or a hope of ending the war. By writing letters, stone-cold soldiers of the Nazi War machine could temporarily retrieve the forgone humanities, and share their attitudes on the war with someone who doesn’t belong to the army. In a broader sense, if the soldierly comradeship was the ideal type of Nazi illusion of *Volksgemeinschaft* (people’s community) which required absolute commitment to the greater goals of the Reich and Nazism, wartime letters sent home offered an escape from *Kampfsgemeinschaft* (combat community), since these letters not just revealed their disdains on the war, and even questions on the Nazi leadership.

This chapter will scrutinize German soldiers’ letters and letter writing practices as a psychological refuge they pursued to maintain familial relations. It argues that mailed correspondence between soldiers and family members helped them justify their participation in the war and its atrocities as a necessity to defend home and draw self-portraits as victims. Section one will examine the healing function of letters. By writing letters, soldiers reflected their internal psychological struggles when committing or witnessing various atrocities. This section will follow change in the soldiers’ morale at the beginning and toward the end of the war after they became certain about their defeat. Section two will analyze the relationship between

home and war, or how the soldiers drew connections between defending home and their acts in the battlefield. Although German soldiers, during most years of war fought on foreign lands, the majority of them considered the German invasion to be a defensive war guarding the homeland.

Section one: The Faith Lies Back Home

On January 11 1942, the forty two year-old POW camp commander Konrad Jarausch's health condition significantly deteriorated due to his typhoid fever. Despite his illness and mental depression, Jarausch still replied a letter to Miss Caspar, a family friend and a church colleague.

In this letter Jarausch wrote:

It isn't true that the big tasks are here and the smaller ones at home, because actually everyone here lives by depending on home. I can't say anything about the front. But we're not soldiers who've cast everything aside in order to give themselves over completely to life, their destinies, or God. We live from that which we have brought from home, and nurture ourselves with what we hear from home. Most of us can only stand it here, because they see their time here as merely a temporary thing.⁷⁶

Two days later on January 13, Jarausch sent his last letter to his wife and his new born son. While he optimistically wrote that "Now goodbye and we will be well together with our child"⁷⁷, he died 15 days later from typhoid fever. Jarausch's death on January 28 1942 put an end to his career as a soldier. But before he passed away, Jarausch had already revealed his suspicions and resentments toward the war. Different from most of his comrades who would intoxicate themselves with alcohol and maintained sexual relationships with Russian and Polish women, Jarausch found himself an outsider since the first days at camp.

⁷⁶ Konrad H. Jarausch, *Reluctant Accomplice*, 211

⁷⁷ *ibid*, 213

For example, when Jarausich witnessed the mass starvation and cannibalism among Russian POWs, he wrote to his wife: “After all that I’ve seen, I cannot spot a single enemy amid millions of Russians. Mostly these people are unhappy victims of a crazed political system whose roots lie far back in Russian history.”⁷⁸ Although Jarausich failed to realize or refused to admit that it was his country’s invasion rather than the Russian political tradition that led to the traumas he witnessed, he dared to question the righteousness of this war. Jarausich wrote: “I worry that the result will be a Europe that is entirely consumed with the need to restore the destroyed foundations of material existence. We’ve been able to survive because we are living at the expense of these people and are sucking them dry. What should we expect, other than bitterness and an abiding desire to overthrow this foreign rule?”⁷⁹

A devoted Christian and a school teacher himself, Jarausich could neither convince himself nor justify the unbearable humane tragedies that took place in his camp with his knowledge of literature and religion. Additionally, months of harsh tasks to manage the POW kitchen, and the bankrupted fantasy of a quick end to the war further shattered Jarausich’s morale. A middle aged man as Jarausich was, he simply could not cope with the intense psychical labors or the cold Russian winter.

In such dichotomy that one faithfully believed in the God while simultaneously had to watch his prisoners starving to death, Jarausich felt repugnant with the war and turned to his family. He could only find redemption and comfort through contacts with his wife, hearing the sorties related with his new-born son, and reading the interesting news on the home-sent

⁷⁸ *ibid*, 195

⁷⁹ *ibid*, 170

newspaper *Frankfurter Zeitung*. Jarausach confessed in his letter: “Our energy is sapped by the lives we lead; each of us suffers from it. God forbid we should do something, or think something. In such circumstances, my greatest pleasure lies in what you have to tell me about our child. Please tell me everything about him.”⁸⁰

Not just POW camp commanders but also did soldiers of frontline combat units felt themselves “unfitting” the war. In autumn 1942, Willy Peter Reese, an infantryman who fought in what historians called “Rzhev Meat Grinder”, battle of Rzhev, wrote in his parents before taking a leave back home due to bullet wounds: “Who were are? Philosophy, ethnics, and thought were replaced by self-preservation. We had no faith to sustain us...The fact that we were soldiers was sufficient basis for criminality and degradation, for an existence in hell. Our totems were self, tobacco, food, sleep, and the whores of France...We could die unconcerned.”⁸¹ If life at frontline turned men into beasts and made the lively earth a funereal abyss, memories of home offered Reese an refuge that levitated his sunken morale since the life back home remained him of those forgone peaceful days and bright youth-hood. In such bitterness and repentance, Reese wrote to his parents: “We dreamed of youth, before the war stole it from us, pictured our unlived lives yearningly to ourselves. We thought of home. We had to go home, bolt the doors, and strangle our sons, the instant their mothers had given birth to them, so that there would be no more war in this world.”⁸²

⁸⁰ Jarausach, 165

⁸¹ Reese, 90

⁸² *ibid*, 98

By and large, the Nazi regime supported the letter exchanges between soldiers and their home-front families as long as such communications did not run into conflict with its broader war plan. However, the regime supported family communication not because the Nazi leadership valued family relationship or soldier's mental health. Rather, according to Thomas Kühne, "the family had no right of its own in the Third Reich. The Nazis praised motherhood and family as biological resources of militarized *Volksgemeinschaft* rather than as a retreat from it."⁸³

In other words, what soldiers and their family members cared about, specifically love and personal safety, the regime cared not. The Nazi regime only allowed such communication to run undisturbed because it contributed to the efficiency of its killing machine. Had soldiers all become psychologically inactive and depressed, would the grand projects like *Lebensraum* (living space) or *Endsieg* (ultimate victory) never be achieved. Especially given that the National Socialist movement tried always to present itself as born in the trenches, and aimed to set the frontline community as the paradigm of national *Volksgemeinschaft*, maintaining the non-threatening contacts between Soldiers and civilians would actually facilitate the regime's political ideology.

However, once those letters written by soldiers or their families expressed any signs of anti-war and anti-Nazi sentiments, the consequences might be fatal. Writing letters to express their attachments with family and their repugnances with the war, soldiers sometimes did break the line and violated the army censorship. Once their harsh words on the regime or the war been

⁸³ Kühne, 86

discovered, both soldiers and their home-front families might encounter seriously punishment including death penalty.⁸⁴

In the case of Jaraus, when he described to his wife about the sufferings of Russian POWs and the German's brutal violence in the camp, he especially wrote on the first line "Keep this somewhere safe and do not copy."⁸⁵ According to Paul Roland, author of *Life in the Third Reich: Daily life in Nazi Germany, 1933-1945*: "It was common practice for soldiers' letters to be tested for invisible ink and any form of code (even the innocuous codes used by lovers) was forbidden. The Nazi leadership was so fearful that captured German soldiers might be susceptible to Soviet Propaganda that the Reich Security Office confiscated 20,000 letters written by German POWs, which remained undelivered at the end of the war."⁸⁶ Writing letters expressing the oppositions against the war or regime became an increasingly dangerous practice both for soldiers and their families during the last years since actions spreading defeatist sentiments or doubts on the German ultimate victory would be punished with death sentence.

To protect their fellow comrades, German veterans sometime adopted mutual-censorship. Bidermann recorded an incident that happened in his platoon. On July 22 1943, near Leningrad, a twenty-year-old Alsatian soldier received a severe wound and subsequently died at his post. Bidermann found a letter in his tunic which was written by the fallen soldier's mother. The mother wrote: "Our dear son, you have now been sent to distant Russia as a German soldier.

⁸⁴ Paul Roland, *Life in the Third Reich: Daily life in Nazi Germany, 1933-1945*, (London: Arcturus Publishing Limited, 2015), 120

⁸⁵ Jaraus, 156

⁸⁶ Paul Roland, *Life in the Third Reich*, 122

There will come a time for us in France when the sun shall shine again. We have heard that the Russian treat the Alsatians very well... The neighbor has told me... Throw away your rifle and go to the Russians. Surely they will treat you well.”⁸⁷ Upon reading this letter, Bidermann knew that it was a soldier’s duty to pass the letter to a higher command since such speech not just distrusted the German ultimate victory, but also advocated for high-treason. However, for the sake of comradeship and sympathy for a grieving mother who lost her son, Bidermann made a conscious decision not to bring additional hardship on the soldier’s family.

Admittedly, expressing anti-war or anti-Nazi sentiments did not cover all the topics soldiers discussed with families at home. Instead of denouncing the war or the regime, writing letters primarily helped soldiers to cope with their personal depression and redeem the sense of becoming morally degenerated. The purpose of writing was not so much anti-Nazi as it was personal and emotional. Comparing the fate or nation or the destiny of German race with the safety and well-being of family members, soldiers clearly preferred to write on the latter topic. Even when soldiers chose to write about politics, it is noteworthy to remember that their political comments were largely pro-Nazi, nationalist, and war-enthusiastic. Wolfram Wette attested that the letters soldiers sent back home revealed how effective the regime’s propaganda was in influencing soldiers’ views. Soldiers’ writing indicated that they had indoctrinated to interpret things happened around with National Socialist propagandas.⁸⁸

Section Two: Guarding Home

⁸⁷ Bidermann, 195

⁸⁸ Wolfram Wette, *The Wehrmacht, History, Myth, Reality*, Lucas Schneider, trans. (London, Harvard University Press: 2006), location 2111 on Kindle

In the spring of 1946, two U.S led sociologists M. I. Gurfein and Morris Janowitz published their research on the fighting morale of Wehrmacht soldiers. In their research *Trends in Wehrmacht Morale*, Gurfein and Janowitz selected five key questions to measure the basic attitudes of Wehrmacht soldiers. The key questions covered the topics of : (1) Expectation

of Victory, (2) Confidence in the Battle Situation, (3) Belief in Secret Weapons, (4) Fear of Revenge by the Allies, and (5) Faith in Hitler.⁸⁹ The research inquired German POWs from a time period between June 1944 to March 1945, and the result was summarized into the following table ⁹⁰:

TABLE I

TRENDS IN WEHRMACHT MORALE BASED ON WRITE-IN QUESTIONNAIRES

Date of Capture	(1) June 26-28 1944	(2) July 1-17 1944	(3) Aug. 1-10 1944	(4) Sept. 1-10 1944	(5) Mid- Sept. 1944	(6) Mid- Oct. 1944	(7) Nov. 15-30 1944	(8) Jan. 1-14 1945	(9) March 1945
Number of Prisoners	363	155	160	643	634	345	453	324	388
Place of Capture	CHER- ST. CAREN- MALO METZ- BOURG TON to LE NANCY WEST WEST AA- BOURG ST. LO MANS Region FRONT FRONT CHEN- WEST WEST								
QUESTIONS	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Do you trust the Fuehrer?	Yes 67 No 18 N.A. 15	57 27 16	68 17 15	65 19 16	60 24 16	42 43 15	64 22 14	62 30 8	31 52 17
Do you think it is possible to eject the Allies from France?	Yes 42 No 38 N.A. 20	37 49 14	49 29 22	27 51 22	— — —	— — —	51 30 19	39 47 14	10* 83* 7*
Do you believe that Germany is winning the war?	Yes — No — N.A. —	— — —	52 11 37	38 39 23	46 33 21	28 57 15	50 27 23	44 42 14	11 78 11
Do you believe that revenge will be taken against the population of Germany after the war?	Yes 16 No 75 N.A. 9	13 81 6	36 51 13	28 61 11	21 67 12	18 74 8	— — —	— — —	— — —
Do you believe that Germany still has war decisive "Secret Weapons"?	Yes 37 No 35 N.A. 28	44 37 19	66 15 19	49 37 20	48 32 20	33 52 15	53 29 18	47 40 13	14 77 9

Note: *Question on March 1945: "Do you think it is possible to eject the Allies from Western Germany?"

⁸⁹ M. I. Gurfein and Morris Janowitz, "Trends in Wehrmacht Morale" *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (Spring, 1946) (<http://www.jstor.org>), 80

⁹⁰ *ibid*, 81

As the table indicates, by January 1945, 62% of the 324 Wehrmacht soldiers still trusted the Führer Hitler, and 44% still believed that Germany is winning the war. When it came to March 1945, two months before the German capitulation, there were stunningly 31% Wehrmacht soldiers having their faith in Hitler, who was by then only able to command the meager troops around Berlin. In addition to uncover the fanaticism of Wehrmacht soldiers, the table also indicated that most of the German POWs in Western Front did not believe that revenge will be taken against the German population. However, given that the majority of German soldiers were fighting in the Eastern Front against the Soviet Red Army, and given that Germany's more than 80% military casualties took place in the Eastern Front (200,000 losses in North Africa, Italy, and Northwest Europe whereas 4 million losses in Soviet Union)⁹¹, there are sound reasons to doubt that the polls conducted in Western Front could not represent the whole picture. Additionally, researchers also need to note that the Wehrmacht soldiers' morale was not equivalent with German soldiers' morale since the conscripts of Volkssturm might have higher tendencies to desert whereas the soldiers of Waffen SS divisions might have held even more radical faiths in Nazism.

For soldiers who chose to fight until the bitter end, the question they encountered was that how to justify their participations in the war after realizing the enemies had gained upper hand and Germany might not win. Some soldiers explained their choices in letters that they opted to fight because of the duty to defend Germany, and to guard their own home. One letter exchange between Scheiderbauer and his father (a WWI veteran who also served in Western Front in WWII) illustrated Scheiderbauer's perception of the defensive war. On October 20 1944,

⁹¹ Reese, vi

Scheiderbauer received a letter from his father on the east bank of Rhein, which read as follows:

“ My hope is that soon it will all be over, it can’t go on for much longer.”⁹² Upon reading this letter, Scheiderbauer wrote: “Hope that the war would soon be at an end was something I did not cherish even in secret. I also did not believe that a single of my comrades shared it, because the alternative, namely what would become of Germany if the dams of the Eastern Front broke, was plainly unimaginable. In that sense, we have our duty to do and did it diligently, even if it was soon to be with the last strength we had.”⁹³

Bidermann also confessed in his letter to father: “The willingness of soldiers to die for political beliefs began to fade. The code of honor, however, long inherent in the German soldier who stood to protect the fatherland with weapon in hand, remained within his consciousness. The soldiers continued to sacrifice their lives, not for the members of the party but for the fatherland.”⁹⁴ Omer Bartov noticed soldiers’ letter to families indicated that despite their purported a-political, and non-Nazi reasons to continue to war, the rhetoric, and vocabularies soldiers adopted were totally influenced by Nazism.⁹⁵ Words like “Cultured People”, “sub-human”, and “living space” were comply used by soldiers. For example, Private Kurt Christmann exclaimed to his father that: “What would have happened to cultural Europe, had

⁹² Scheiderbauer, 121

⁹³ *ibid*, 122

⁹⁴ Bidermann, 152

⁹⁵ Bartov, *Hitler’s Army*, 106

these sons of the Steppe, poisoned and drunk with destructive poison, these incited sub-humans, invaded our beautiful Germany? Endless we thank our Führer, with love and loyalty.”⁹⁶

Some radicals even argued the entire war in East Front was a righteous endeavor not just to guard Germany, but also to save the entire West Europe. Otto Carius, one of Wehrmacht's most renowned tank commander for his destruction of more than 150 enemy tanks, “proudly” wrote in his memoir that “We are especially grateful when we think of our fallen comrades who, together with volunteers from all countries of Western Europe, fought to be saved from Communism.”⁹⁷ In such assessment, the German invasion in Soviet Union would be counted as defensive. It would be therefore reasonable to argue that Wehrmacht and SS troops were defending the German fatherland in the suburb of Moscow, in the scorched Russian villages and in gas chambers of Auschwitz. Ridiculous as such argument was, it reflected the internalization of Nazism among frontline soldiers.

Despite soldiers' repeated attempts to perceive the war as an enterprise they undertook to guard the family and the German fatherland as a whole, their demonization of the enemy and faith in Germany's mission in East were already Nazified. If soldiers really only fought to guard the fatherland and home, why would they experienced most of their combats on foreign soils? Given that it was not until late 1944 and early months of 1945 did Western Allies and Red Army crossed Rhein river and occupied East Prussia, how could a soldier justify the previous five years of war with the untrustworthy excuse of defending fatherland? However, the striking fact was that only with the exception of Jarausch and Reese, all the rest of soldiers whom I researched

⁹⁶ *ibid*, 106

⁹⁷ Carius, xi

unanimously described the war as a defensive struggle to protect German fatherland. The possible explanation would inevitably connect soldiers' self-reflections with the Nazi Regime's political project. I would argue that soldiers were already indoctrinated into the Nazi war-machine ever since the beginning of the war. Whether actively embraced Nazism or subconsciously accepted it, soldiers since day one had immersed their self-projections of Germany with the Nazi's grand plan of *Lebensraum* or *Volksgemeinschaft*. Therefore, for example, a German soldier would not even conceive the burning of Russian villages as aggressive because as a racially superior German he was, he was bestowed with a natural right to rule over the inferior races and sub-humans. Additionally, he would not even interpret German invasion as an "invasion" because the racially superior Germans deserved more living spaces that were occupied by the evil Judeo-Bolshevism. To conquer the living space was not to invade, but to defend the inborn right of the Aryan race. It was only towards the bitter end did German soldiers realize that they were defending a concrete fatherland rather than a Nazi illusion of Thousand-Year-Reich.

Chapter Three: Victimization in Post-War Memoirs

Introduction:

When the war ends, begins the new life. In the epilogue of *Downfall* (*Der Untergang* 2004), Traudl Junge, the protagonist of the film who also serves as Hitler's private secretary, finds herself encircled by a column of Soviet soldiers in the ruins of Berlin. Instead of bursting into fire, both Germans and Russians maintain a surreally solemn tranquility. Having nowhere to flee and knowing no-one to follow, Traudl and the last remaining personnel from Hitler's underground bunker lay off their helmets and weaponry. While some of the soldiers and staffs are depleted of hope and courage to move on, Traudl dares to take her chance, and walks to the Russians. A few seconds later, Traudl encounters a nine-year old boy, Peter Kranz, a member of Hitler Youth whose parents were executed by the SS. Traudl grabs the boy's hand and walks away. Then, in this two and half hour film, Traudl smiles for her first time. With the warm sunlight glowing over the somber ruins of Berlin, Traudl and Peter mount on a discarded bicycle and ride into the bright future.⁹⁸

Similar to *Downfall*, a quite large number of literatures and cinemas regarding German soldiers in WWII cast the capitulation and their defeat as the end of all stories; therefore fostering the stereotypical narrative that everything was bright and wonderful since justice had prevailed over evil and the Nazi dictatorship was overthrown by heroes. But the reality is far

⁹⁸ Oliver Hirschbiegel, *Downfall*, 2004

more complicated. For many German soldiers, losing the war was not the end of their involvement and accomplice in the war. Instead of reshaping a new self-identity or breaking away with their inglorious past, German soldiers not just managed to live on with their identities as previous Nazi soldiers in the post-war federal democracy, but even successfully imposed their historical narratives and political influence upon the Federal Republic. Even though Wehrmacht soldiers lost war to the Soviet Union and Western Allies in the military conflict, they managed to alter the images of German soldiers from perpetrators of Nazi's war-machine to victims of war and terror.

This chapter discusses the historiography and influence of German soldiers' self-victimization through a combination of secondary literatures and soldiers' own post-war memoirs. Section one scrutinizes the war-ending experience and reflections of Otto Carius, Gottlob Bidermann, and Armin Scheiderbauer. Section two analyzes the transition of historiographies of German WWII soldiers from the Cold War era till today. Section three explains soldiers' selective memory and self-victimization by introducing the psychological analysis "Cognitive Dissonance"..

Section One: Capitulation and reflections on defeat

In April 1945, during the battle of Ruhr Pocket, Otto Carius was ordered to hold a vintage point near Dortmund at all cost.⁹⁹ By this time, the Allies had already crossed the Rhein river and

⁹⁹ Carius, 223

entered the industrial heartland of Germany. From his telescope Carius observed the collapse of Volkssturm (people's storm) defense as German women and girls waved to their "liberators" when the American troop peacefully marched in to the city. "White flag suddenly waving everywhere."¹⁰⁰ At his own position, even Wehrmacht's most well-equipped unit and the cornerstone of Ruhr defense, the 502 Heavy Tank Battalion, was fully occupied by wounded soldiers whose morale had been shaken. Having realized that further resistance would not help repelling the enemy, the 502 Heavy Tank Battalion surrendered.

However, in Carius' memoir, this Panzer-Ace did not mention any word like surrender, capitulation, or laid down arms. While the memoir's language was overall straightforward and simple, the specific paragraphs describing his surrender were rather confusing and somehow misleading. Instead of accepting his defeat, Carius played the game of words. He wrote:

"I decided to deal with the Americans. I then expressed my desires. Everything was discussed at crops and the evacuation was approved."¹⁰¹

Reading Carius' rhetorics such as "deal with" and "evacuation" word by word, it can be inferred that accepting defeat was not an reassuring or pleasant business. Even after his surrender, Carius still held a condescending attitude toward his enemies since he insisted that Germans were better soldiers than their American and Soviet counterparts. Such condescending attitude was reflected by his sarcastic comments on the American army as he wrote: "Five

¹⁰⁰ *ibid*, 222

¹⁰¹ *ibid*, 223

Russians were more dangerous than Thirty Americans. The Americans took so long to close the pocket, especially given that nobody around wanted to fight anymore. A well organized German corps could have closed the pocket in a week.”¹⁰²

In addition to the widespread discontent with the defeat, the hatred of Soviet Union didn't cease with their defeat but developed into unrealistic hopes of waging a joint war with Western Allies against Russia. Such hope of continuing the war, however, was tightly intertwined with the support and sympathy for the Nazi regime and its leaders. While being held in captive in an American prisoners of war camp, Carius and his comrades mourned for the death of Hitler.

We were glad that our comrades in the east continued to fight on bitterly to hold up Ivans for as long as possible. Unfortunately, their sacrifice were in vain! The Americans stopped at Elbe. How easy this advance would have been and how willingly our units would have marched to the east! Our hopes for a joint struggle against the Russian dwindled with that...Großadmiral Dönitz spoke on the radio after the announcement of Hitler's death. We had all put on our uniforms one more time, and we knew that it was the last time.¹⁰³

Once the joint campaign against Russia had turned out to be a far-fetched fantasy, Carius began to accept his fate as a prisoner of war. Nevertheless, such acceptance of defeat never developed into genuine reflections of war-atrocities but rather hatred of the occupational authority. Such hatred developed in parallel with Carius' self-victimization. The logic of Carius was simple—— the more brutal the occupational authority became, the more innocent and more righteous his accomplice in the war had been. Carius cacophonously condemned the “inhumane” treatment of German POWs in American camps.

¹⁰² *ibid*, 210

¹⁰³ *ibid*, 226

Not only the losing, but also the winning a war demands human greatness. This greatness was completely missing in our opponents. I had the impression that the occupying powers wanted to prove all the costs that they weren't better than we were, rather worse! ... There were no rations, not a drop of water. They immediately opened fire if someone wanted to go to the bathroom.”¹⁰⁴

Hilarious as it was, a Panzer commander of Hitler's elite Amor Battalion who was once greeted and awarded by Himmler personally started condemning the American's lack of humanity in the POW camp.¹⁰⁵ Carius's narrative somehow represented the selection bias of German soldiers. That instead of regarding “humanism” or justice as the universal standard of judgment, they selectively neglected the inhumanities among German forces while commanding the retribution of the enemies. As if only when Carius himself was put into position of the powerless, did he ever mention the word human greatness.

Carius was soon released by the American Army because of his “miserable appearance”. He borrowed a civilian coat, and falsely claimed himself to be a farmer's apprentice.¹⁰⁶ But one has to question that had the Jews, Russian prisoners, and Polish civilians ever been released because of their miserable appearances? Given that Carius had been fighting in the Eastern Front from September 1941 all the way till November 1944 as a frontline combatant, we have sound reasons to assume that he was aware of the atrocities that committed by his comrades. But unfortunately, Carius never mentioned a single word about Jew or murdered Polish and Russian

¹⁰⁴ *ibid*, 227

¹⁰⁵ *ibid*, 194

¹⁰⁶ *ibid*, 227

civilians for a single time throughout his memoir. By contrast, Carius “proudly” wrote in the foreword of his memoir:

We are especially grateful when we think of our fallen comrades who, together with volunteers from all countries of Western Europe, fought to be saved from Communism. When that finally evolved into this book, it was done as an attempt to vindicate the German frontline soldier... Through these publications, the defamation of German soldier in film, television, and the press has been countered. If soldierly virtues and any type of idealism have been trampled on and ridiculed for, then nothing else can be expected.”¹⁰⁷

Through a close look at Carius’ testimony, it can be deduced that victims of the German invasion in East Europe were not innocent civilians and prisoners of war who were murdered by the drunken executioners of Reserve Police Battalions, sadistic Wehrmacht soldiers or Camp guards. But rather the contrary. According to such historical narrative, it was the ill-minded Judeo–Bolshevism and its western collaborators who undermined the righteous, and honorable German soldiers who sacrificed themselves and Germany to prevent the downfall of the “Kulturvolk”. In assessment of Carius’s testimonies, instead of displaying his soldierly virtue, Carius portrayed himself a condescendingly fanatic Nazi-soldier who mercifully escaped legal judgment by deception.

Unlike Carius, veterans captured by the Soviet Union did not enjoy the good fortune of being released from POW camps shortly after the end of war. Scheiderbauer was captured by the Red Army in a military hostile in Danzig while he was severely wounded. Bidermann laid down his weapon in Courland of Latvia two weeks after the capture of Berlin. Both Bidermann and Scheiderbauer were immediately imprisoned for their compliance in the fascist invasion of Soviet Union. But lives in Soviet camps sometimes could be rather different. For example, Bidermann was transferred to the Gulag camp Hozzi near the Bay of Finland, and spent most of

¹⁰⁷ *ibid*, xi

his prison life doing harsh physical labors and was constantly under the threat of starvation. By comparison, Scheiderbauer suffered less hardship since he served his sentence in an Anti-Fascist camp near Georgenburg (Kaliningrad). While staying in the camp, Scheiderbauer was not assigned with harsh labors but intellectual re-education courses such as Marxist theory and revolutionary agitation.

Despite the different experiences as prisoners of war, Bidermann shared the “pride” and “condescending” attitudes with Carius, and also believed his participation in the war saved the European civilization from Communism. Though it is hard to tell whether such narrative was a common practice of German veterans when they try to appeal their memoir to West vs. East political environment of Cold-War or it was their genuine beliefs at wartime, the self-portrait as defenders of civilization did help justify their participation in the war. When Bidermann’s unit was encircled by the Red Army at Courland, and when the supply from German homeland was broken, Bidermann tried to convince himself with the faith:

We saw the true sense of our operation in Courland as having one clear defined objective: the defense of European culture. We believed that our presence on the norther flank of Soviet army could prevent the Red tanks from thrusting deep into the heart of Europe...Perhaps the birth for a new Europe was at hand and remained solely dependent on our will to resist the Soviet army to the last hour.¹⁰⁸

Were Bidermann, Carius, and many other German veterans at Eastern Front defenders of humanity and civilization? Could it be possible that because frontline soldiers were really ignorant of the atrocities of anti-partisan warfare and the Final Solution? While the testimonies of Bidermann and Carius might offer an affirmative answer, the secretly recorded confidential conversations among German prisoners of war in American and British captivity lead to a

¹⁰⁸ Bidermann, 253

different answer. As Sonke Neitzel and Harald Welzer argued: “ Even though only 0.2 percent of the conversations recorded was about Holocaust, it is not how often but how they talked about German crimes against humanity that is relevant.” ¹⁰⁹ The surveillance concluded with the belief that it was clear that practically all Germans knew or suspected that Jews were being murdered en masse. Nevertheless not everyone could had known everything.

In addition to the secret records of American and British intelligence, personal accounts of German veterans also indicated that soldiers of frontline units were either aware of or personally participated in the crimes against humanity. Willy Reese’s confession in his memoir *A Stranger to Myself* left no room for the clean Wehrmacht which was misled and misused by the criminal Nazi clique. ¹¹⁰ Reese confessed:

Slowly we headed toward Gomel, seeing always the same thing: harvested fields in a storm, smoke clouds on the horizon. Russia was turning into a depopulated, smoking, burning wreckage-strewn desert, and the war behind the front bothered me still more, because those it affected were noncombatants. I was partly responsible for this devastation and the brief it brought the people, responsible like all the nameless victims, like all soldiers.¹¹¹

Suppose Reese’s memoir and the secret transcripts of German POWs offered us compelling evidence to disprove Bidermann and Carius’s false portrayal of German soldiers as defenders of civilization, the next question worth discussing is that how could someone consider himself being morally noble while simultaneously and wholeheartedly committed in perhaps the world’s unprecedented crimes against humanity? The question might be explained the the study

¹⁰⁹ Sonke Neitzel, Harald Welzer, *Soldaten : on fighting, killing, and dying : the secret World War II transcripts of German POWs*, trans, Jefferson Chase (New York : Alfred A. Knopf, 2012), 101

¹¹⁰ Reese, *A Stranger to Myself*, xvii

¹¹¹ *ibid* 148

of historiography of Nazi soldiers in the post-war two German states and the psychological term of cognitive dissonance.

Section Two: Post-war Literatures and the Historiography of Nazi Soldiers

Germany was completely in ruins by the time of capitulation. Unlike 1918 when most of German territories were intact and remained in hands of Germans, the defeat in 1945 led to an unconditional surrender and foreign occupations. Moreover, given the war's destruction on the nation's economy and infrastructure, Germans at the time concerned themselves primarily with the question of survival. The first generation of *Nachkriegsliteratur* (Postwar Literature) and *Trümmerliteratur* (rubble literature) therefore focused their topics on the suffering of ordinary civilians after the defeat as well as the solemn lives of German POWs in Soviet camps. *Nachts schlafen die Ratten doch* (Rats sleep at night), a famous short novel written by Wolfgang Borchert, narrated the story of a young boy standing at a building's ruins in order to protect his brother who had already been killed by the Ally air-bombing. Worrying about the rats that might prey on his three-year old brother's dead body, the boy guarded the ruins and refused to leave. To encourage the boy to carry on life, a random elder man lied to him that rats sleeps at night and promised that he will bring the boy a little rabbit as gift.¹¹²

Despite the emphasis on sufferings of ordinary Germans, *Trümmerliteratur* also addressed to topics such as the Holocaust and Jewish sufferings. *Todesfuge* (Death Fugue), written by a Romanian-born poet Paul Celan described the miserable lives of Jews in German death camps. In the Death Fugue, Paul Celan's repetition of "*Schwarze Milch der Frühe wir*

¹¹² Wolfgang Borchert, *Nachts schlafen die Ratten doch*, <https://www.deutschunddeutlich.de/contentLD/GD/GT82rRatten.pdf>

trinken” (Early morning black milk that we drink) and the metaphor of “*ein Meister aus Deutschland, ein Mann wohnt im Haus der spielt mit den Schlangen*” (a master from Germany, a man who living in the house who plays with the snake) conveyed a compelling message about the ubiquitous existence of terror in the death camps.¹¹³

However, Post-war literatures’ reflection was limited with the condemnation of Nazi regime and wartime cruelty. Apart from such critiques, the image of ordinary Wehrmacht soldiers remained pure and unsullied with Nazi crimes. As Thomas Kühne put: “Trading war stories validated a crucial piece of one’s identity as man and citizen. The ex-serviceman wanted to keep alive the memories of those parts of their biographies that were supposed to prove their manliness in the first place.”¹¹⁴ Even though the Allied Control Council prohibited German soldiers from establishing anti-democratic veteran’s societies or paramilitary organizations like the *Freikorps* of the Weimar Republic, veterans managed to fit their historical narratives with the political correctness of the Federal Republic, namely the Cold War. As the Iron Curtain shut down and divided the world into two antagonist camps, the task of exerting justice and punishing Nazi collaborators soon gave way to a more urgent need of rearming against communism. Similar to the U.S occupation of Japan which gradually switched its focus from purging war-criminals to preventing the rise of leftist communism, the Allied Control Council in Germany also began to reconcile with former Nazi soldiers and generals.

The portrayal of Germans soldiers as victims who fought to defend their homeland against both Stalin’s yoke of Bolshevism and the domestic Nazi dictatorship therefore occupied

¹¹³ Paul Celan, *Todesfuge*, <https://www.cercleshoah.org/IMG/pdf/lafuguedelamort.pdf>

¹¹⁴ Thomas Kühne, *The Rise and Fall of Comradeship*, 221

the mainstream historical narrative when the Supreme Commander of NATO, Eisenhower and the Federal Chancellor, Konrad Adenauer exonerated for German soldiers in 1951 and 1952 that “the German soldiers had fought bravely and honorably for their homeland”; “all those of our countryman who in the framework of high soldierly traditions fought honorably.”¹¹⁵

In accompany with the statist propagandas, grass-root and non-government veteran’s communities such as *Heimkehrer*(home-comer), *Verband deutscher Soldaten*(German Soldier League), and *Opfergemeinschaft*(Victim’s Community) draw some significant popularity in Federal Republic. These veteran societies, according to Thomas Kühne, focused to epitomize the “humane”, “altruistic”, and “affectionate” side of the community of suffering; therefore, claiming that the suffering and sacrifices cleansed soldiers from their guilt of being complicit in genocide. As for the war-crimes and Holocaust, they belonged to the doings of “others”, namely Himmler’s SS Troops.¹¹⁶

However, embellishing the suffering of soldiers could neither exonerate nor deny Germans soldiers’ accomplice in Nazism and genocide. Once the rearmament politics lost its popularity, criticism and reflections on the wartime crimes of German soldiers and civilians grew. Such criticism was evident from the West German Student Movements in 1960s as the Federal Chancellor, Georg Kiesinger, was found out to be a former Nazi Party-member. Even in

¹¹⁵ David Clay Large, *Germans to the Front: West German Rearmament in the Adenauer Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 114

¹¹⁶ Kühne, 221, 241

the Bundeswehr (Federal Defense), objectors and deserters grew continually. In 1960, the number of objectors exceeded 10,000. In 1980 and 1990, the number even rose to high as 60,000 and 100,000 personnel.¹¹⁷ Even back to the 60s when Carius finished his memoir, he could only sought to publish the book via an far-right publisher *Buchkameradschaft Scharnhorst* (Comradeship Book Scharnhorst).

Following the German reunification and the end of Cold War, German soldiers' public image increasingly deteriorated as the *Wehrmachtsausstellung* (Wehrmacht Exhibition) in 1995 organized by Hamburg Institute for Social Research drew significant public attention. With vivid photos and artifacts, the Wehrmacht Exhibition swept away the falsely constructed picture that Wehrmacht soldiers were simply bearing their duty to protect German fatherland from communist invasion. According to Hannes Heer and Jane Caplan: "It (the Wehrmacht Exhibition) revealed just how late in the day 'duty' had been discovered as a substitute for morality...It thus forced into the heart of the legend, and exposed the terrible truth that Holocaust took place not only in Auschwitz, in Buchenwald, and other extra-terrestrial sites, but also in the territories occupied by Wehrmacht troops, and with their energetic participation."¹¹⁸

Unlike the Federal Republic's complicated relationship with former Nazi soldiers, the East German state built anti-fascism as the regime's corner stone ideology. Instead of phrasing

¹¹⁷ Ute Frevert, *A Nation in Barracks: Modern Germany, Military Conscription and Civil Society*, trans. Andrew Boreham, Daniel Brückenhaus (Oxford; New York: Berg, 2004) 272-274

¹¹⁸ Hannes Heer and Jane Caplan, "The Difficulty of Ending a War: Reactions to the Exhibition 'War of Extermination: Crimes of the Wehrmacht 1941 to 1944'", *History Workshop Journal No. 46* (Oxford University Press, 1998) , (<https://www.jstor.org/stable/4289586>), 189-190

the former Wehrmacht soldiers as heroes who fought to protect the fatherland, the SED regime and its Soviet ally interpreted Nazism as a product of capitalism. Therefore, in order both to justify its own legitimacy and to fight an ideological war against the Western world, East Germany actually undertook a much harder method to hunt and punish the former Nazi soldiers. The first and only president of GDR, Wilhelm Pieck, had once addressed in radio from Moscow of the ‘bitter, tortured consciousness that the German people did not free themselves, but instead followed the Nazis to the end, and supported them in their war crimes.’¹¹⁹ Early communist leaders of GDR were filled with anger and disgust at their country’s betrayal. Moreover, their anti-Nazi sentiments encompassed their own poor treatment in exile or in concentration camps, and the frustration that most German failed to resist the Nazis even in the final moments of war.¹²⁰

Unlike the free press in the Federal Republic, which sometimes might have been taken advantage by far-right groups, the *Hauptverwaltung Verlage und Buchhandel* (Central Office of Publishing and Book-selling) within the Ministry of Culture censored all published literary works in GDR. Therefore, influenced by both from personal grievances and ideological antagonism(Nazism as the sworn enemy of Communism), the GDR leadership forbid any former Wehrmacht soldier to barely openly discuss his wartime experience let alone publish a

¹¹⁹ Wilhelm Pieck, as quoted in Elizabeth Wenger, “Berlin von Hitler befreit!”, *Reden und Aufsätze*, 3 vols, East Berlin, in “Speak, Memory? War Narratives and Censorship in the GDR”, *The Slavonic and East European Review* 96.4 (October 2018) (<https://www.jstor.org/>), 644

¹²⁰ Elizabeth Wenger, “Speak, Memory? War Narratives and Censorship in the GDR”, 645

memoir. Strict censorship on war-literature never got loosen till the regime's final collapse in 1989. For former Nazi soldiers, publishing memoirs that emphasis "soldierly virtue" or "righteous war defending fatherland" equals suiciding since collaborating with Nazism could be accused of High Treason and would be punished with death.

Section Three: discovering soldiers' minds — a Cognitive analysis

The enthusiasms of Carius and Bidermann seem to confirm the ground-breaking researches of Edward Shils and Morris Janowitz on the Wehrmacht's relationship with the Nazi regime. In their 1948 research on German prisoners of war , Shils and Janowitz pointed that German soldiers' active participation in the war could be explained by their interdependence and comradeship with other rank and file soldiers within primary groups.¹²¹ According to Shils and Janowitz, the concept of primary group refers to face-to-face combat units like a platoon or a squad. Opposing to larger secondary groups like the *Volksgemeinschaft* (people's community) and the entire Wehrmacht that are complex and infiltrated by Nazism, the primary groups, Shils and Janowitz explained, were built on sympathy, mutual care, and intimacy among comrades.¹²² Shils and Janowitz further created a de-nazified portrayal of the German soldiers by arguing that the tenacity and stubbornness of German soldiers in the later period of war should not be attributed to the influence of National Socialism but a result of the cohesion within primary

¹²¹ Shils and Janowitz, "Cohesion and Disintegration", 280

¹²² *ibid*, 281

groups.¹²³ In other words, rank and file soldiers in Wehrmacht were not different from their Anglo-America counterparts, and therefore remained uninvolved with Nazism and its war atrocities. Shils and Janowitz wrote: “Soldiers on the whole were out of touch with the operation of the Party on the home front. Hence the political system impinged little on their consciousness.”¹²⁴ Published in 1948, this research appealed to the cold war politics since it offered rationales for the rearmament of *Bundeswehr* (Federal Defense Force). Although the cohesion within primary groups might explain the tenacity and high battle-morales of German soldiers, itself could not vindicate the inseparable connection between frontline soldiers and the Nazi leadership because primary groups did not exist in isolation.

In 1980s, Omer Bartov questioned the reliability of the Shils and Janowitz’s conclusion. Bartov argued that given the enormous casualties and the content change of personnel among frontline units, the cohesion of primary groups were already impeded by the flocculations of personnel and the replacement system. Bartov argued that the Wehrmacht was deeply involved with the Nazi regime’s genocide plan and ethnic cleansing. The Wehrmacht was a crucial apparatus for the regime’s overall racial war in the East, and the ideologies of the secondary groups, namely Nazism, was intrinsically internalized within primary groups of Wehrmacht. According to Bartov, Wehrmacht soldiers’ post-war memoirs that were published during 1960s

¹²³ *ibid*, 286

¹²⁴ *ibid* 303

greatly emphasized Germany's physical hardships while normalized or repressed its own inherent criminality.¹²⁵ In Bartov's view, Wehrmacht veterans' perception of the "preventive war" in Soviet Union as the noble and self-sacrificing endeavor of Germany to guard Europe against the "Asiatic hordes" was intrinsically a National Socialist historiography. He therefore concluded that the army was "neither simply forced to obey the regime by terror and intimidation, nor was maneuvered into collaboration by the machinations of minority of Nazi and opportunist officers, nor, finally, supported the regime due to some misunderstanding of what National Socialism really meant and strove for. The Wehrmacht as an institution formed an integral part of rather than a separate entity from the regime."¹²⁶

Connecting Bartov's conclusion with the soldiers' testimonies that I had personally examined, I prefer Bartov's explanation over Shils and Janowitz's simplification of primary groups. My reason being simple: While primary groups are ubiquitous among all societal organizations, (a family is a primary group, and so is a Red Cross surgery team), not all of them had committed so many humane atrocities like those of the German WWII army. Thomas Kühne also stand by Bartov's side on this debate. He explained that primary groups did not operate in a cultural vacuum.¹²⁷ The sodality of face-to-face combat units could also lead to surrender or disobedience. However, instead of rejecting the orders coming from Nazi high commands,

¹²⁵ Omer Bartov, *Hitler's Army*, 7-10

¹²⁶ Bartov, *Hitler's Army*, 9

¹²⁷ Kühne, *Rise and Fall of Comradeship*, 110

German soldiers' primary groups displaced strikingly docile obedience and heartfelt commitment.

As I have explained in section one that German rank and file soldiers were mostly aware of their comrades' participations in the Holocaust in East Europe. This section further develops my argument that primary groups of the WWII German army was internalized into Nazi ideology and formed an integral part of the broader secondary groups. These discoveries lead my essay to a clear argument that Wehrmacht veterans not just knew what was going on in the Eastern Front, but also they themselves combated under the heavy influences of National Socialist pedagogy. Reflected in their memoirs, veterans continued to propagandize the wartime National Socialist interpretations of the war and the demonizations of their enemies. The rhetoric of German soldiers used in their post-war memoirs, namely emphasizing the their own casualties while normalizing/repressing their inherent criminality, could be explained by the psychological term of *Cognitive Dissonance*.

According to psychologist Yehudit Auerbach's study on Israel-West German relations, she defined: "the cognitive dissonance theory contends that all human beings strive for harmony and balance in their cognitive system. Any disturbance of this balance arouses a sense of discomfort (dissonance) which in turn leads to the reorganization of the cognitive system."¹²⁸

¹²⁸ Yehudit Auerbach, "Turning-Point Decisions: A Cognitive-Dissonance Analysis of Conflict Reduction in Israel-West German Relations", *Political Psychology* v7.3 (International Society of Political Psychology: September 1996) (<https://www.jstor.org>), 534

Therefore, when a person's understanding of a certain concept or events changed dramatically either due to the turning-point-decision (TPD), his/her inconsistent memories before and after the turning-point-decision (TPD) would accumulate a feeling of discomfort and self-contradict. To relieve discomfort and to reestablish harmony on our own cognitions, we tend to alter one of the opposing memories and convey the other one as the "correct" cognition. In her research, Auerbach explained normalization process of Israel-West German relations and confirm the hypothesis that the more severe the pre-decisional conflict, and the stronger the post-decisional dissonance, the greater the consequent change in attitude toward the "enemy."¹²⁹ The change of Israel's relationship with Germany from hatred Nazi perpetrators of Holocaust to an arm-sale partners and a political ally dramatically transformed Germany's public image in Israel.

However, unlike Israel-West German relationship in post-war period, Soviet-West German relationship did not fully reconcile but rather deteriorated due to the Cold War. It was not until West German chancellor Willy Brandt's groundbreaking *Kniefall von Warschau* (kneel of Warsaw) did West German authority begin to display regret and sincere apology toward a communist state. Comparing the Israel-West German relationship with Soviet-West German relationship, while in both cases there existed severe pre-decisional conflict, a strong post-decisional dissonance did not occur in the latter case. For the West German state, the enemy of the past was still considered as the greatest security threat of today.

¹²⁹ Auerbach, "Turning-Point Decisions", 545

Put cognitive explanations on the individual level, for German veterans, the capitulation of Germany in May 1945 ended up formed a externally exerted turning-point-decision. With the downfall of Nazi regime and the return of federal democracy, the public's cognitions of race, war, and politics were fundamentally overturned. Thus, a severe conflict occurred for German soldiers since their deeds that were still considered as "glorious" and "righteous" by yesterday's Nazism are suddenly being reproached and cursed by today's federal democracy. But the soldiers were the same group of people, and their public images under National Socialism were by all means positive and heroic. However, given the drastic change of political environment, German soldiers knew well that their violent purges on "inferior races" and "people unworthy of living" could only trigger off more public criticism and judicial punishment. To overcome the discomfort they suffered after the turning-point-decision, German soldiers chose to reorganize their cognition of war experience by omitting their inherent criminality while emphasizing the hardships that they endured. German veterans' attempts that aimed to create cognitive harmony and to reduce psychological discomfort finally constituted the common practice of self-victimization in writing post-war memoirs.

This chapter first examined the testimonies offered by Carius and Bidermann. Although Carius and Bidermann all claimed the German soldiers' combat in East Front was righteous and defensive, inquiries of other German POWs and memoirs of Reese offered opposite answer. Then, this chapter moved to discuss the historiography and literature of German WWII soldiers in post-war Federal Republic. I argued that the de-Nazified portrayal of German Wehrmacht soldiers was largely a by-product of Cold War politics. The rearmament project and West-East antagonism indirectly exonerated the Wehrmacht soldiers's participation in the Nazi regime's

war crimes. Moreover, section two also briefly compared the war literatures in the two German states. While Wehrmacht veterans in West German could publish their far-right memoirs without encountering many difficulties, publishing war literatures in East Germany was under heavy censorship. Finally, this chapter tried to explain the occurrence of “de-Nazified”, or “unsullied” Wehrmacht soldiers through organizational and psychological analysis. By demystifying the image of apolitical primary groups, I concluded that even face-to-face units in Wehrmacht were influenced by the Nazi state as secondary group. The last few paragraphs sought answer the psychological motivations of Wehrmacht soldiers and tried to explain their self-victimization in writing memoirs through a brief cognitive analysis.

Conclusion: Denial

In 2005, Ton Verheul, a Dutch film director, produced a price-winner documentary called *On the Threshold of Oblivion*. The film investigated the 1944 Wehrmacht raid on a small Dutch village of Putten which murdered 700 civilians.¹³⁰ While family members of the Dutch victims and survivors claimed the incident to be an act of war crime, German Wehrmacht veterans said they know nothing about the raid on Putten. Franz Kurowski, a Wehrmacht veteran who turned himself into a post-war historian of the Herman Göring Division (an elite German division) replied to the director about raid on Putten during their second interview in 1985: “But that was something else. This was about the security service(he used the word ‘service’).”

But during the director’s first visit that took place three years ago, the veteran threw the director out of his house, called him a “Red Journalist”, and even brought out his gun license.¹³¹ Two interviewers then drove to the German Tank Museum at Munster, where they met a group of Wehrmacht veterans who were having their tour. In this scene, the interpreter of the museum, Mr. Thiel, proudly and confidently introduced to his audience: “ These were German cannons built by Krupp...Everything else was Soviet-made and of lesser quality. That’s why I always repeat: ‘Krupp steel, German quality’”¹³² Then the interviewer asked veterans the same question about Wehrmacht’s raid on Putten. And one veteran replied: “We didn’t fight against you, but the Russians.” His exoneration was followed by another veteran:

“To be exact, not against Russians, but against Bolshevism. We defended our country against it, and more importantly, for all of Europe. If we hadn’t stopped it, it would have reached your

¹³⁰ Ton Verheul, *On the Threshold of Oblivion*, <https://vimeo.com/ondemand/threshholdofoblivion?autoplay=1>

¹³¹ Ton Verheul, *On the Threshold of Oblivion*, 23:46

¹³² *ibid*, 49:33

country(Netherland) and France too. We also had to fight the Americans when they landed in France, Italy, and Africa. In the end Russians outnumbered us by twelve to one. And we still tried to keep them away from the borders of the Reich. To defend our people. Russians didn't sign the Geneva Conviction, stirred up by the Bolshevik propaganda, they massacred our people. Germans didn't do that(murder civilian). It was the Russian"¹³³

However, when the interviewer mentioned that herself came from Putten and her great-uncle was murdered by the Wehrmacht, the veterans fell silent. One veteran said:

“War has its own laws. The Wehrmacht could never have the permission to march into other countries peacefully”¹³⁴

Nothing was learned from history. Comparing the soldiers' testimonies in the documentary with the testimonies of Bidermann and Carius, it can be argued that exonerating for their participation in war-crimes was not an individual case but rather a common practice among German veterans. The reason that German veterans were so reluctant to confess their compliance in the crimes against humanity could be explained by both individual and societal analysis. On individual level, soldiers were recruited and trained during the Nazi era, and their behaviors were certainly “noble” according to the National Socialist morality. However, as the defeat overthrew the Nazi regime and installed a brand new federal democracy, the once “justice” and “righteous” Nazi ideologies suddenly were marked as inhumane and evil. However, contrary to the drastic change of political environment in Germany, the Wehrmacht veterans were pretty much the same group of people. Therefore, in order to maintain their public image as “noble” warriors who fought to defend the German fatherland, Wehrmacht veterans selectively deleted the inglorious sides of their war experience and chose to believe the altered memory. Resulting from such cognitive dissonance, many of soldiers' testimonies were inconsistent and lacked detail.

¹³³ *ibid*, 50:31

¹³⁴ *ibid*, 53:16

One the societal level, it was specifically the political antagonism of Cold War cultivated a free space for veterans to publicize their views, and consequently re-invent the historiography. After all, the old enemy of the Third Reich was still the enemy of Federal Republic. Moreover, given the vast number of Wehrmacht soldiers, any attack on the Wehrmacht could elevated to an reproach on the entire German nation. As Wolfram Wette put it: “Almost 20 million German men served in the Wehrmacht in the years 1939-1945. It was truly a people’s army. Any indictment of what military units in the field did to civilians was an indictment of masses of ordinary Germans.”¹³⁵ Admittedly, as Chapter one and two have discussed, German veterans were themselves exposed to the brutality and suffered a lot from the war. Self-victimization of frontline veterans started during the war. But different from veterans’ post-war narratives, wartime self-victimization was narrowed down to individual levels, or primary groups, such as a soldier himself and his comrades of the same platoon. Narratives that attempted to victimize and exonerate for the broader communities, the secondary groups, such as a Army Group, and the entire Wehrmacht originated only in post-war period.

The stories of German soldiers functions as a mirror to reflect the problems of today. I still remember a shocking photo from *The Guardian* that I saw in 2012. In that photo, a group of U.S Marines combating against terrorism in Afghanistan hang a SS flag under the U.S national flag.¹³⁶ Although the Pentagon punished these marines and apologized to the public about this rare case, it is still worthwhile to question ourselves that how far away the military is from radical nationalism?

¹³⁵ Wolfram Wette, *The Wehrmacht*, 28

¹³⁶ “US marines in fresh controversy over sniper team photo with Nazi SS flag” *The Guardian*, Feb 9, 2012 (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/feb/09/us-military-marines-nazi-ss-flag-photo>)



Image 5: “U.S Marines with SS Flag”, *The Guardian* (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/feb/09/us-military-marines-nazi-ss-flag-photo>)

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